WESTERN Adventures

DEC. '40

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

BACK TRAIL TO CHEYENNE

By ED EARL REPP

●

And many other action tales

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

10c

DECEMBER • 1940

This Christmas-give a BULOVA

$1.00 DOWN ~ TEN MONTHS TO PAY!

The Gift of Gifts — A BULOVA! Buy it from ROYAL — one of the largest *authorized distributors* of BULOVA Watches in America. Take TEN FULL MONTHS to pay only the standard advertised cash price.

HOW TO ORDER: Send only $1.00 with your name, address and, in confidence, a few facts about yourself such as age, occupation, etc. Shipment comes to you prepaid for **TEN DAYS' TRIAL.** No C. O. D. to pay on arrival.

Absolute Satisfaction Guaranteed. If entirely pleased, pay small amount stated each month for **TEN MONTHS.** Otherwise, return selection and we promptly refund your $1.00 deposit.

The name BULOVA is your guarantee of a quality timepiece — our record of 45 years, fair and square dealings with the American public stands behind every transaction. Our written guarantee accompanies every Diamond or Watch. Order TODAY and avoid the "Christmas rush."

$29.75

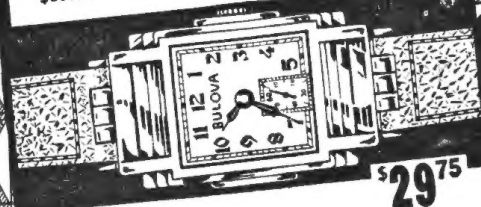
17 Jewels

BB-41 . . . BULOVA "Goddess of Time." Very latest. "Rose" rolled Gold plate case, with "Rose" dial. 17 Jewels. Fashionable silk cord bracelet. **$29.75 — only $1.00 down — $2.87 a month.**

$37.50

17 Jewels

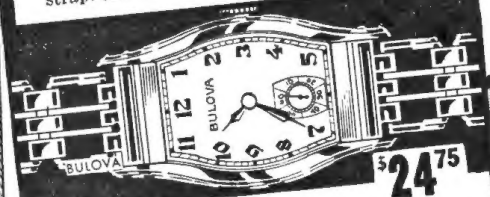
BB-42 . . . 14-K Yellow Gold **"Lady Bulova,"** richly engraved. Truly the "gift for a lifetime." The dainty case is 14-K Gold, thru and thru. 17 Jewels for accuracy. Matched link bracelet. **$37.50 — only $1.00 down — $3.65 a month.**



$29.75

17 Jewels

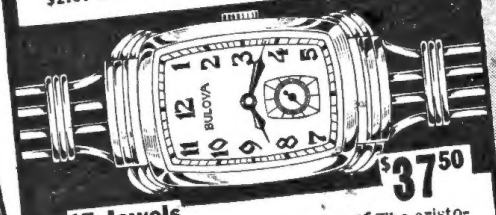
BB-43 . . . BULOVA "Corrigan" — Handsome Yellow Rolled Gold plate case with stainless white back. 17 Jewels. Genuine leather strap. **$29.75—only $1.00 down—$2.87 a mo.**



$24.75

15 Jewels

BB-44 . . . BULOVA "Dean" — Streamlined Yellow Rolled Gold plate case, with stainless white back. 15 Jewels. Matched link bracelet. Great value at **$24.75 — only $1.00 down — $2.37 a month.**



$37.50

17 Jewels

BB-45 . . . BULOVA "Senator." The aristocrat of gent's wrist watches! Yellow Rolled Gold plate with stainless white back. 17 Jewels. Matched link bracelet. **$37.50 — only $1.00 down — $3.65 a month.**

Every BULOVA Watch delivered in handsome presentation case.

THE GIFT IDEAL

Nationally Advertised

17-Jewel

BULOVA "Co-Ed"

$24.75

$1 down

$2.37 monthly

BB-46 . . . BULOVA Co-ed — dedicated to American girlhood! Richly engraved, newest style case in Yellow Rolled Gold plate with stainless white back. 17 Jewel BULOVA radio time movement. Fashionable silk cord bracelet. A gorgeous watch and a grand value! **$24.75 — only $1.00 down — $2.37 a month.**

$29.75

3 GENUINE DIAMONDS

BB-47 . . . Beautiful new ring of 14-K Yellow Gold set with 3 genuine diamonds. Specially selected fiery, brilliant center diamond. **$29.75 — only $1.00 down — $2.87 a month.**

BOTH RINGS Only $19.75

LUCKY CLOVER "DUO"

BB-49 . . . Beautifully symbolic! Matched Engagement and Wedding Rings of 14-K Yellow Gold. Engagement ring features a fiery, genuine diamond of surprising size. **Both Rings for only $19.75. only $1.00 down — $1.87 a month.**

(For purposes of clarity illustrations of rings slightly enlarged.)

GENT'S DIAMOND-SET ONYX INITIAL RING

BB-48 . . . 10-K Yellow Gold, distinctively designed. One genuine diamond. Two raised gold initials. Specify initials desired. **$16.95 — only $1.00 down — $1.60 a month.**

$16.95

FREE CATALOG
The guide to BETTER Christmas Gifts on CREDIT!

DIAMONDS, WATCHES, SILVERWARE, CAMERAS, GIFTS, TEN MONTHS to pay. Standard cash prices. Send for your copy NOW — before you buy jewelry or gifts!

America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers

ROYAL DIAMOND & WATCH CO. Inc.

Established 1895

Address - DEPT. 52 H

24 West 40TH St. NEW YORK

ARE YOU JUST HOPING TO LAND IN A GOOD JOB?

HOPE without foundation doesn't go far in this competitive age. But hope PLUS TRAINING is a winning combination!

Today, in all kinds of professions and trades, men are getting ahead — earning more money — getting promotions — because of serious, systematic study of International Correspondence Schools Courses.

I. C. S. Courses are prepared by authorities chosen for practical as well as theoretical knowledge. Instruction is a personal — not a "rubber stamp"— relationship between student and instructor. The coupon will bring you detailed information on the subject in which you need training.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 4902-L, SCRANTON, PENNA.

★ Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X: ★

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

☐ Agriculture ☐ Air Brake	☐ Cotton Manufacturing	☐ Marine Engines	☐ R. R. Signalmen's ☐ Refrigeration
☐ Air Conditioning	☐ Diesel Engines	☐ Mechanical Drafting	☐ Sanitary Engineering
☐ Architectural Drafting	☐ Electrical Engineering	☐ Mechanical Engineering	☐ Sheet Metal Work
☐ Architecture	☐ Electric Lighting	☐ Mine Foreman	☐ Steam Electric
☐ Auto Engine Tune-up	☐ Fire Bosses	☐ Navigation	☐ Steam Engines
☐ Auto Technician	☐ Fruit Growing ☐ Heating	☐ Patternmaking	☐ Steam Fitting
☐ Aviation ☐ Boilermaking	☐ Heat Treatment of Metals	☐ Pharmacy ☐ Plumbing	☐ Structural Drafting
☐ Bridge Engineering	☐ Highway Engineering	☐ Poultry Farming	☐ Structural Engineering
☐ Building Estimating	☐ House Planning	☐ Practical Telephony	☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ Chemistry	☐ Locomotive Engineer	☐ Public Works Engineering	☐ Telegraph Engineering
☐ Civil Engineering	☐ Machinist	☐ Radio, General	☐ Textile Designing
☐ Coal Mining	☐ Management of Inventions	☐ Radio Operating	☐ Toolmaking
☐ Concrete Engineering	☐ Managing Men at Work	☐ Radio Servicing	☐ Welding, Electric and Gas
☐ Contracting and Building	☐ Manufacture of Pulp Paper	☐ R. R. Section Foreman	☐ Woolen Manufacturing

BUSINESS COURSES

☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising	☐ Civil Service	☐ First Year College	☐ Railway Postal Clerk
☐ Bookkeeping	☐ College Preparatory	☐ Foremanship	☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
☐ Business Correspondence	☐ Commercial	☐ French ☐ Grade School	☐ Service Station Salesmanship
☐ Business Management	☐ Cost Accounting	☐ High School ☐ Illustrating	☐ Sign Lettering ☐ Spanish
☐ Cartooning	☐ C. P. Accounting	☐ Lettering Show Cards	☐ Traffic Management

DOMESTIC SCIENCE COURSES

☐ Advanced Dressmaking	☐ Home Dressmaking	☐ Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering
☐ Foods and Cookery	☐ Professional Dressmaking and Designing	

Name.....*Age*.....*Address*.....

City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada
British residents send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England

ADV—1

WESTERN Adventures

CONTENTS DECEMBER, 1940 VOL. 1 NO. 2

The editorial contents of this magazine have not been published before, are protected by copyright and cannot be reprinted without the publisher's permission.

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH ACTION NOVEL OF THE RANGE

BACK TRAIL TO CHEYENNE . . . Ed Earl Repp 9

Throwing his lead with the hired guns of a savage and inhuman land vulture wasn't Marshal Gary Randall's idea of the way to bring in a wanted man—especially when that man had just saved his life!

THRILL-PACKED NOVEL OF PIONEER TRAILS

LEAD POISONING FOR A SILVER SYNDICATE
Rolland Lynch . . . 37

Flaming terror stampeded the Washoe country as innocent men were tolled into the guns of phantom raiders who vanished into the night with their blood-won booty. . . .

SHORT STORIES

BRONC RIDERS DON'T QUIT . . . C. William Harrison . 33

For fifteen years Sixty Johnson had taken a beating on the rodeo circuits—he had a few seconds in which to decide if a killer horse was any worse than a treacherous rider. . . .

OWLHOOT SALVATION . . . . . Homer King Gordon . 74

Hot-lead insurance was the only protection a man could have against a drygulching range glutton, but Lex Lincoln wasn't letting his partner's lead-spewing sixes buy it for him. . . .

BORDER BRAND . . . . . George Armin Shaffel 85

In Apache Basin Andy Calvert ran head on into a holocaust of trouble booming with gun thunder and spiked with lead. . . .

FUN IN TUCUMCARI . . . . . C. Wiles Hallock . . 99

A rangeland poem.

BOOTS AND SADDLE GAMBLER . . Ralph Yergen . . . 100

When Gilt-edge Ragan turned cowman he found he had taken chips in a torrid game where nothing but a flaming pair of smoke poles could buck the deal. . . .

DEPARTMENT

THE HOME CORRAL . . . . . The Editor 5

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 4, 1940 10c per COPY

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Bimonthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Treasurer and Secretary. Copyright, 1940, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

Printed in 16 the U. S. A.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK

The Home Corral

AMONG the first of our new friends whom we welcomed at The Home Corral the other day was William Richards, of Keansburg, New Jersey. William has some right fine words of praise for our first issue, and we're proud to reprint his letter herewith:

"I am a boy of fourteen who loves the West and stories of the West," he writes, "and I really mean it when I say that the first issue of Western Adventures provided me with some genuine first-class entertainment. Although I have never written to any magazine before, I figured that W. A. was well worth the time.

"I sincerely hope that the magazine will be published about twice a month as two months is too long to wait between issues, and one week, as in the other Street & Smith Westerns, does not afford me enough time to read an entire copy with my school work to do. I also wish that a serial would be added as I enjoy them very much and they add a lot to a magazine's interest. I hope that I may drop into The Home Corral again in the future."

Thanks a lot, William, for letting us hear from you. We sure hope our other fans will like Western Adventures as much as you do, so that you won't have to wait so long for each issue. We're just getting this spread started, you know, and we want all of you out on the range to help us by telling us the kind of yarns you like to read, and giving us your suggestions for a magazine which will be tops. Any time you care to ride up, light and chat awhile —you're always more than welcome!

And from Pontiac, Michigan, Robert Upton writes us:

"I am writing to express my thanks to you for the issue of your new magazine, Western Adventures. I like it because it gives such a variety of stories. In reading your first issue I have found no criticisms. I have read many Street & Smith publications and this is one of the best Westerns I have ever read. As for suggestions, I might suggest you put a short story in pictures in some part of your magazine."

We're glad to note what this reader says concerning the "variety of stories." Wonder how some of you other readers feel about this point. Are you interested in just straight cattle-country yarns, or do you get a bang out of stories which are based on any kind of rousing, red-blooded, he-man adventure in the West? Ride over to The Home Corral, pardners, and say Howdy, and let's hear what you'd like to see in our new magazine.

A third letter from the South sort of completes the circle, and at the same time touches on another phase of what we think a well-rounded-out magazine should have. Fred Banks of Birmingham, Alabama, comes up with a comment on the looks of the

book and the work of the illustrators. Here's what Fred has to say:

When Western Adventures showed up on the stands I didn't have to take more than one quick look to know it was a Street & Smith publication. It had the same classy look of Western Story and all other S & S magazines.

And I wasn't let down by what was inside the first issue of Western Adventures—the stories were swell. But since I started talking about looks, I'll stick to that. Your illustrators certainly ought to get a boost because no other Western magazine touches the men you use. I spotted Eggenhofer right off and to me he's the best. I think illustrations add a lot to a story, and Eggenhofer's drawings are so right in every way they tell a story by themselves. I liked Delavey and D. C., though they were new to me, but I recognized another old hand in Bjorklund.

So Western Adventures and I sort of got together through mutual friends and I was sure glad to meet up with it. I wish you'd bring it out more often—there aren't enough *good* Western magazines.

Thanks, Fred. We promise to keep giving you the best Western illustrators to be had.

Wish we had space for some more of the interesting letters which came in our mail bag, but we want to tell you a bit about Ed Earl Repp, the word wrangler who is the author of BACKTRAIL TO CHEYENNE, the lead-off story in this issue.

Although a Pittsburgher by birth, Repp has lived in the West for many years and knows it like a native. Several of his ancestors trekked westward in 1849 in covered-wagon trains from the Ohio Valley, and settled in Oregon and Southern California.

Ed Earl now lives on a rancho of his own in the San Fernando Valley, which he likes to call El Rancho Costa Mucho—a brand-new home set in walnut acreage, and into which he just moved in July of this year. His hacienda is in the rambling early California ranchhouse style, and the floor area alone covers several thousand square feet.

This top-hand author of colorful fast-action Westerns is widely traveled, and he has an enviable reputation as an authority on Western Americana.

Ed writes that a brand-new palomino horse is soon to take its place in a brand-new corral on the Rancho Costa Mucho. The author has ridden considerably the length and breadth of California and Arizona, and on the family cattle ranch near Acton, California, known as The Sunset Ranch, he has had plenty of experience riding herd. This spread, which sometimes needed fifteen expert hands to run it, is now wrangling dudes.

Repp, although only forty years of age, has been writing fiction for many years, and during that time has written more than a thousand short stories, novelettes and novels. He has fourteen books to his credit, as well as sixteen successful screen plays written by him for Dick Foran of Warners, Charles Starrett of Columbia, Buck Jones of Universal, and Reb Russell of the Independents.

Like most Westerners, Ed likes to fish, particularly for trout in the Owens Valley streams and salmon in the Klamath River, from which he has recently returned. He has ridden horseback from Carson City across Death Valley to Los Angeles, but between long rides and fishing, Ed opines that he'd rather fish. But he probably enjoys rodeos, he says, about as much as any sport, and whether it's at Salinas, Pendleton or Cheyenne, you'll find no group of excited spectators is complete without Ed Earl Repp.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH, MARY. EVERYTHING LOOKS SO HOPELESS
IT ISN'T HOPELESS, BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY RADIO. TOM GREEN IS DOING WELL. TALK TO HIM
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT. RADIO'S STILL A YOUNG GROWING FIELD
TOM'S RIGHT. AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD PAY
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST
SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS
THERE'S NO END TO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
OR WORK ON LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS
OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO. MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS! THAT'S $10 EXTRA I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
OH BILL. IT'S WONDERFUL. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME JOB NOW -- AND A BRIGHT FUTURE IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed all the lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator.

HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 Madison St.
Lapeer, Michigan

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio service manager for the M——— Furniture Co. for their four stores.

JAMES E. RYAN
119 Pebble Court
Fall River, Mass.

$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time

I am doing spare time Radio work, and I am averaging from $700 to $850 a year. Those extra dollars mean so much—the difference between just barely getting by and living comfortably.

JOHN WASHKO
97 New Cranberry
Hazleton, Penna.

$200 to $300 a Month In Own Business

For the last two years I have been in business for myself making between $200 and $300 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field.

ARLIE J. FROEHNER
300 W. Texas Ave.
Goose Creek, Texas

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
in your spare time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years

If you can't see a future in your present job; feel you'll never make much more money, if you're in a seasonal field, subject to lay offs, IT'S TIME NOW to investigate Radio. Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio; Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets—start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $5 to $10 a week extra in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. YOU ALSO GET A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio, Television Offer You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio". It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on penny postcard —NOW!

J. E. Smith, President
Dept. OKD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Mail this to get 64 page book FREE

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. OKD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

AGE.....

NAME .....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

THIS BOOK has shown hundreds how to MAKE MORE MONEY

THESE NOTED EXPERTS WILL HELP YOU

SELECT THE WINNING FOOTBALL TEAMS

Charles Moran, Editor, Football Year Book
Noted Football Authority

Stanley Woodward, Sports Editor, N. Y. Herald Tribune

Arthur Sampson, Football Expert, Boston Herald

James Kearns, Football Editor, Chicago Daily News

Paul Zimmerman, Sports Editor, Los Angeles Times

Les Goates, Sports Editor, Salt Lake City Desert News

Jack Troy, Sports Editor, Atlanta Constitution

Lorin McMullen, Sports Editor, Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Clyde McBride, Sports Editor, Kansas City Star

● How did you make out in the "pool" last week? Did you pick better than 80% of the winning teams? No? Then you need the help of the greatest array of Football Experts who ever collaborated to pick the teams that should win.

Their choices for next week and for every week until the close of the season are given in a chart in the FOOTBALL YEAR BOOK. They tell you, in their Selector's Chart, the team that should win!

And, the Selector's Chart is only part of the FOOTBALL YEAR BOOK—it is so chock full of football facts that these famous experts and sports editors have said this:

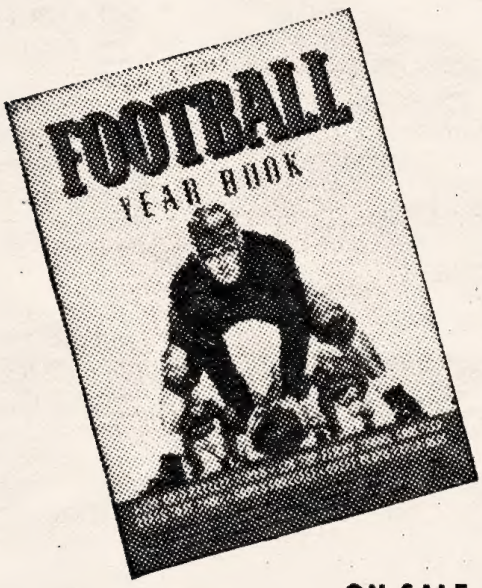
"This book fills a definite need"—
Asa S. Bushnell
Executive Director Central
Office for Intercollegiate Athletics

"This YEAR BOOK gives a good inside glimpse of the gridiron situation"—
Lou Little
Head Coach, Columbia University

"This book has the inside on every team in the country"—
Jim Crowley
Head Coach, Fordham University

"For football information FOOTBALL YEAR BOOK has the stuff"—
Arthur J. Daley
New York Times

And many others endorse this unique and valuable help to both the football player and the interested spectator. It will be mailed you postpaid if you cannot buy it at your newsstand.



STREET & SMITH'S

FOOTBALL YEAR BOOK

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS 25c THE COPY

BACK TRAIL TO Cheyenne

Gun wolves snarled for a new victim—and Marshal Gary Randall had to head the pack.

BY ED EARL REPP

CHAPTER I

BOOTHILL BAIT

A NAMELESS fear had its clammy fingers about Gary Randall's throat as he halted his staggering mount and lifted a frost-blackened face up from the collar of his sheepskin storm coat. On either side of him the perpendicular walls of Granite Gorge flung the shrieking wind back and forth until the sound was like the howling of lost souls. Snow drove heavily through the pass, leaping in buffeting gusts at the back of the rangy young deputy United States marshal, and filling the deep defile with an impenetrable barrier of white.

Hoarfrost and icicles clung to the muzzle of Gary's jaded mount. But the lawman couldn't see that now. He pawed with a gauntleted hand at his rime-crusted eyes. Blinking hard, he swung his bleary gaze this way and that for something to focus on that might tell him his fears were groundless. But he saw only a vast white void. A panic that was hard to curb claimed him when he moved his numb fingers before his eyes and failed to see them. The terrifying knowledge that he was going blind out here, miles from nowhere, came

to him. And the worst blizzard in many years was raging about him, blocking him in the gorge.

It was small consolation to him to reflect that he wasn't far from his goal, Mountain Valley near Slippery Rock, and from his outlaw quarry holed up there. He had left Picacho early this morning in the belief that by nightfall one of the longest man hunts in the Northwest would be ended with the apprehension of Con Morgan, train robber and killer. For fifteen years Morgan had managed to keep his whereabouts a mystery. Then a tip to headquarters in Cheyenne had sent Gary Randall into this lonely, storm-swept corner of Wyoming. By painstaking investigation he had finally winnowed a hundred clues down to one: Con Morgan was living in Mountain Valley, a respected rancher!

Leaden skies had only half hinted what was to confront Gary Randall when he started this journey. But by noon a false night had settled over the naked scarps of the Wind River Range, and snow eddied and whirled down into Granite Gorge, piling deeper as he plodded on toward his goal.

Then just when he felt sure he could make it to Slippery Rock if he crowded his mount to its utmost, tragedy struck. Out of the blinding storm had reared a giant form, blocking the narrow canyon. The horse wheeled madly in fright, its shrill scream knifing the howl of the wind. In a flash Gary had seen the monstrous Teton grizzly. He had a vision of slavering jaws, of bared fangs and vicious, reddened eyes. The great brute's shoulders were raw with festered wounds, marks of some primeval foray of the wilderness. The pain of those gashes had turned the normally savage beast into a juggernaut of fury for all it confronted.

Gary whipped out his carbine and fired just as the grizzly roared forward to attack. His last vision was of blood spurting from between the animal's terrible eyes. A blinding flash followed the gun explosion, searing his own eyeballs with powder flame. In the intense cold, the sudden contact of searing heat against gun metal had blown the breech of his old .30-30.

The awful pain seemed to set Gary's brain afire as he clawed his eyes open. Half-dazed, he only dimly saw the grizzly go down in a mass of twitching fury. Then he gave himself to the agony of his own injury. He rubbed his eyes with snow for relief. The lids were seared raw. Reasoning that the bleariness would wear off, he spurred blindly into the thickening blizzard, resolved to reach Slippery Rock before he was snowed in the gorge.

THE endless hours wore on. Exhaustion came to Gary, bringing an overpowering desire to roll off his horse into the downy drifts and sleep. But some fathomless reservoir of courage kept him fighting even after his whole body had become chilled and sensationless.

There came a time when the pony sank down in the snow and didn't try to rise, when Gary's frantic spurring only goaded from it a pitiful shuddering and squealing. The animal was done. To the deputy it meant that he was marked for death too. With frozen, set features, he tumbled off the bronc into the white drift. He went down to his waist, snow crowding over his boot tops and filling the half boots with flakes that would soon be ice.

Gary drew his .45 and groped along the horse's body until he found

the head. Placing the gun against the animal's ear, he fired. For a moment, the horse threshed wildly, then it was all over. But not over for Randall; for him it was only the beginning of the end. There would be an eternity of torture before death claimed him.

Gary had to fight a swift desire to take the easy way out. On hands and knees—the only way he could travel—he moved ahead. Very soon he came up against a blank wall. He groped along it like a man feeling his way down a tunnel in the dark. Again, bare granite blocked his way.

A groan escaped his lips. It seemed to him that he was hemmed in by walls in every direction. Wildly he pawed at his eyes, trying to pierce the fog before them. He started to tip his face up toward the sky to see if any sunlight remained to penetrate his pupils—and froze in that attitude, listening.

Then it came once more, a gunshot drifting down the wind. Gary fumbled at his Colt and fired it until no shots remained, shouting like a madman as he did so. Within half a minute, the sound of voices came to his ears. Then tiny yellow pin points of light bobbed before him. A shout rose over the mutter of far-off conversation:

"Boys! He's down here, clingin' to the ledge like a treed 'coon!"

Through the howling of the gale came the scuff of snowshoes and the loud breathing of one who had run a long way. Hands tugged at Gary. The pin point of light was a misty glow before him.

"What in tarnation, mister!" someone exploded. "A hundred yards from the house, and you start headin' back down the canyon! Didn't you see our lights?"

Despite himself, Gary could not get his legs under him. "Blind," he muttered. "My gun—something wrong—"

"The devil!" The speaker turned at the approach of others. "This hombre's gone blind out here! Give me a hand, Lang. We better get him inside, and mighty quick."

Two men got Gary on his feet. Then the first man ducked to put a shoulder against his stomach and throw him to his back like a sack of grain. Gary, a hundred-and-seventy-pounder himself, knew a mute wonder at the power of the man as he was borne through the blizzard with strong, steady strides. In a few minutes they were stopping, and a door creaked open to bathe them in foggy golden light. The giant kicked off his webs and stalked across a plank floor to deposit his limp burden on a cot.

Gary lay there in a warm, grateful numbness. As if in a dream, he felt himself carried, cot and all, and placed before a fireplace in which a great fire roared. The man who had carried him announced grimly:

"This looks like a job for you, doc. He's froze 'most solid and blind as a bat. Lucky for him we heard his shot."

"Blind, eh?" the medico grunted. "What under the sun was he doing on a horse if he's blind?"

"He mumbled somethin' about his gun blowin' up. How do his eyes look, doc?"

"Can't tell anything, Travis. Too much black powder crusted over his pupils to get much idea. Any hot water on the fire, Marci?"

"It'll be hot in a minute, doc," a girl's voice answered. "Had I better warm up some soup and coffee?"

Gary created a stir in the ranchhouse by muttering in a cracked voice: "I'd be beholden to you, ma'am!"

Travis, the giant, chuckled in his

deep bass: "Well, doggone it! I bet you could have walked in, 'stead of me havin' to tote you. How long you been rackin' around in that blizzard?"

Gary could only achieve a slurring mumble through frozen lips. "Since morning. Left Picacho at daylight, headin' for Slippery Rock. How far'd I miss it?"

"You're just two miles short of town," announced Travis. "This is the T-Down spread. I'm Travis Toll, owner of the iron. Hope you like our little settlement when you get around to takin' in the sights, mister. I'm afraid you're here for the next four months!"

His meaning failed to penetrate Gary's dulled senses. "I . . . I don't get you," he muttered.

The man called Lang announced in his mournful monotone: "That pass is choked so full of snow there'll be no going in or out till spring thaws. Even the Chinook don't have much effect on it. You're snowbound in Mountain Valley for the winter, son!"

THE medico thrust them out of the way. "That palaver of yours will keep. My work won't. Marci, let's have that hot water. And you and Travis rub this gent's arms and laigs while I see what's what."

There was the protesting squawk of a crane being swung off the fire. A faint perfume found its way to Gary's nostrils. Someone pulled off his boots; then coat and shirt were stripped from him. A woman's fingers, smooth and warm, commenced to massage Gary's arms, while Travis Toll's horny palms scraped away at his frost-bitten legs. Gary started, as the doctor laid a hot compress across his aching eyes.

"Easy, feller," the medico murmured gently. "That powder has got to come off. Then we'll see—" He left the sentence dangling.

There seemed to be seven or eight men in the room. Only fragments of what they were saying made sense to the lawman. The land office, the railroad—those were the things that came up most often. Those and the name of Adam Fargo. Gary gathered that his rescue had come in the midst of a cattlemen's meeting. As he might have expected, the powerful, straightforward Travis Toll was the leader of the group.

Warm blood filtered again through Gary's sluggish veins, bringing new life to his arms and legs, and wave upon wave of stinging agony. Gary clenched his fists, forgetting everything but his pain. Doc Magnus, as he had heard the medico called, bent nearer, his fingers swift and sure. Suddenly he straightened.

"Bring me a lamp, somebody," he grunted.

Silence fell again in the room. Doc raised Gary's head, moved the lamp up before his staring eyes. Immediately, the marshal gasped and shut his eyes tight.

"Good!" was the doctor's verdict. "That's the best sign yet. There's still nerves there, if certain other things ain't burned too bad. But it'll mean wearing a bandage for a couple of days. Then I can tell for sure. You'll either see purty good by then, or—well, sonny, I knowed a blind saddler oncet that turned out the best kaks you ever set on. Don't go gettin' notions about bein' too bad off until the last card's dealt."

The rough old physician's hard-shell kindness did a lot to stiffen Gary's spine. A quick warmth stole through him with the pressure of Marci Toll's fingers on his arm.

"O. K., doc," he said huskily. "Only I hope none of them cards are dealt off the bottom of the deck."

"Count on doc," Travis Toll advised, "to see that the Big Dealer gives you all you've got comin'. He ain't in the habit of missin' much in this game."

Doc Magnus grunted deprecatingly. Then every man in the room tensed, as a cry came faintly from the bowels of the bitter night.

CHAPTER II

KILLER FROM THE PAST

TRAVIS bounded to the door, flung it open, and called out. There was the squeal of new snow under a horse's hoofs. The cattleman exclaimed as a rider emerged from the darkness, dismounted, and plodded into the house.

"Rusty!" Travis exclaimed. "What brings you down here in the middle of this?"

There was a moment of heavy breathing before he was answered. Then: "Fargo's boys have downed a mile drift fence, boss! Two hundred head are through and driftin' fast. You better get out there if you want a herd in the morning."

Gary held his breath, expecting an explosion of virulent cursing from Travis Toll. Certainly it was called for, if he knew his blizzard-range cowmen and their hatred of storm riding. However, it was Lang Woodruff's mournful voice that vented a lively oath.

"This is it, Travis! They've begged us for war. Now they've got it! The cattle can wait. We're carryin' the fight to Fargo and Kennedy tonight!"

Tempers came unbridled, and men stampeded for the door. The T-Down owner's voice rose to stop them.

"Hold on, boys! This is a fool's play you're attempting. Fargo would like us to plunge in this way. We've no proof of his guilt and we'd be putting ourselves beyond the law."

"The law—damnation!" snarled the newcomer. "Who but Adam Fargo would cut your beef loose, with the thermometer bustin' the bulb and all hell blowin' outside? Travis, you've preached peace till Fargo's all but hogtied Mountain Valley. Mebbe we can't prove up on our claims, but we know they're true! It's time you strapped on your guns and saw things our way. Laws that ruin upstandin' men were made to be broke."

"You're talkin' with your mouth, Rusty," Toll came back. "You can't buck the law and get no place. We'll fight this peaceful, like we've done all along. Sooner or later, things will break our way."

"But we'll all be ridin' the grub line by then," snapped Doc Magnus. "The boys are right, Travis. Time's ripe for a showdown. And I'm all for it, myself!"

Angry, determined men seconded his argument vociferously. Someone flung the door open, and the cold blast of the storm drove into the room. Booted feet clanked about as the crowd found storm coats and struggled into them. Travis Toll did not speak until they were filing out the door.

"All right, boys," he rumbled. "I guess you win. But I'm going out and round up those cows, myself. A lot of good this victory will do me if I'm cleaned out before the battle's over."

"You—you're goin' out alone!" Rusty echoed.

Travis grunted impatiently as he got into his heavy coat. "Somebody's got to do it," he countered. "They're my cattle. Be seein' you, gents."

A faint grin played on Gary Randall's face. The old cattleman was

as sly as they came. He knew there was more than one way to skin a cat. The storm sounds dimmed for an instant, as he went through the door. Uncomfortable stillness settled in the ranchhouse.

Then, with a muttered oath, Rusty started after Travis. "Damned old mossyhorn!" he ground out. "He knows we wouldn't let him kill himself out there alone. We're licked again. Come on, fellers!"

Doc Magnus paused by Gary's cot to speak hurriedly to Marci." "I won't be back till tomorrow. Take care of this gent, girl. All he needs is a little push to get himself a case of pneumony. Keep a bandage over his eyes and don't give him no solid grub until you hear from me."

"I'll take care of him, doc," the girl promised.

The door thundered shut, and once more silence came to the cabin, unbroken except for the snapping of burning logs in the hearth and the rising wail of the wind.

GARY lay quietly, his mind busy with disturbing thoughts. For a moment, the ever-present burning of his eyes was beyond his concern. So, too, was his business with Con Morgan. It would be wisest to say nothing of his mission here until he was able to pack hardware and see a man-sized target, if that time ever came.

After a while Marci Toll tiptoed away, evidently believing her patient asleep. She returned to spread a heavy bearskin robe over him.

"Thanks!" Gary murmured. "How about that soup, now?" He grinned, at her gasp.

"Well, you ought to be getting some sleep," the girl said dubiously. "But you're a sort of guest here, so—" The boards creaked lightly under her feet. The sound of china rattling and a bowl being filled with steaming soup made Gary realize how hungry he was. He was sitting up on the cot when Marci came and put a bowl on his lap and a big spoon in his fingers.

"Try that," she said. Her voice was so pleasant Gary could visualize her smile, though he could not actually see it.

He tasted the soup, and found it called for a second bowl and a cup of coffee to settle it properly. The warmth of it was spreading through him as he relaxed and started fumbling a cigarette into shape.

"Better?" Marci asked him. And after his grateful grin, she went on: "You know, you haven't told me your name or much about yourself yet. From what you said, I gather you have business up here."

Caution dictated an evasive reply. Mebbeso, mebbe not," Gary said with a shrug. "The moniker is Randall—Gary Randall. I reckon I'm a footloose son, but even us tumbleweeds have to eat. I was headin' for Slippery Rock to hire out for the winter."

"You'll find plenty of work," the girl answered soberly. "Either riding for us or for Fargo's outfit. Dad's T-Down Combine is hard pressed for men, but the pay isn't the kind to attract punchers when they can make twice as much on Fargo's War Knife pay roll."

"This Fargo seems about as popular as a snake at a parlor social," Gary remarked. "How does he come by his reputation?"

The girl's voice was tinged with irony. "Some say it's because he's supposed to be part coyote. Others simply object to having him claim land they've settled and filed on. Still others don't like the railroad money he's got behind him."

"A railroad up here?" Gary frowned.

"There's going to be. The Mountain Central built in as far as the north end of the valley a few months ago. They've been stuck there ever since, because we've fought them tooth and nail. They claim all land for two miles on each side of the road. Well, we'd be willing to sell if they'd pay a fair price. We're not stubborn folks who hate the railroad on general principles. But a dollar an acre!"

Gary grunted in disgust. "The old army game, eh?"

"Worse. Led Kennedy, the railroad agent, has enlisted Fargo's help in getting the land free. Fargo sold us out to save his own hide. He owns the biggest ranch up here, and it would go at the same figure as ours if he didn't make a deal with Mountain Central. Just what the arrangement is, we don't know for sure. But they're saying he's to get a handsome block of railroad stock for his share."

Gary drew hard on his quirly, wincing as the red tip burned down to his fingers. Hastily he dropped it in his coffee cup. "How does he earn his pay?" he wanted to know. "Cutting drift fences?"

"Raising about sixteen kinds of trouble with our men and cattle is just a side line with him. He bribed the land agent last month, and had him alter his books. Most of us here filed on our land at about the same time. That wasn't so long ago that the time has run out when we can file our final papers. But Fargo moved the dates back, and—well, in the eyes of the government, he has as much right to our land as we have! What's more, he's claiming it. Under a dozen names, he's filed on the whole valley!"

"Mean to say your dad won't fight even to buck a deal like that?" Gary asked incredulously.

A note of impatience entered the girl's voice. "There are other ways to fight greed—lawful ways. Dad knows what he's doing." With a soft rustling of skirts, Marci Toll got to her feet. "You'd better get your sleep," she said crisply. "I'll leave your boots away from the fire, where they'll dry properly. Good night—marshal!"

Gary caught a startled breath. Too late, he remembered the nickeled badge pinned to the inside of one of his half boots! Before he could answer, a door closed after Marci and he was alone.

Dark misgivings rode the lawman. The one thing he hadn't wanted to do was to advertise his presence. That hope was already deflated. But stronger even than this disappointment was a stream of suspicion coursing deep within his mind, a suspicion that concerned Travis Toll and his strange aversion to gun trouble. Strange, because Toll was obviously a proud, hard-hitting man. Gary could think of only one reason for his attitude: The T-Down man shunned any course of action that might bring him to the attention of the law, with its unrelenting memory.

Despite the troubled state of his mind, sleep came quickly to Gary Randall. The fire burned out and darkness brooded over the little ranchhouse.

THE rattling of pans brought the marshal back to consciousness. At first his dulled senses failed to register where he was. Then, with a start, he sat up. He was surprised to find his eyes no longer burned and smarted. Light came in around the edges of his eye bandage and

Gary hurled the ledger just as Kennedy brought his gun up for a deadly shot.

sent hope tingling through him. His sight was coming back!

"Good morning!" The voice came from close beside him, and accompanying it was the appetizing odor of coffee. Marci Toll piled pillows behind him and put the cup in his hand.

"How do you feel this morning, marshal?" she asked, with something mischievous in her tone.

Gary grinned. "Not much misses you, does it?" he parried.

"Not when it's nickel-plated and staring me in the face," came the reply. "So it's a job you're looking for? I'll bet that job walks on two legs and carries a prison record!"

The lawman's reply divulged little. "Whatever my plans were, the storm has changed them. I reckon I'm snowed in here for the winter. I'll have to take a job now or go hungry. Uncle Sam doesn't load his riders down with loose change, you know."

The girl didn't answer for a while. Finally: "You'll be able to leave in a week, if your eyes are all right. The storm broke sooner than anybody dreamed it would. There's a foot of snow all over the valley, and I suppose the pass has ten or fifteen feet. But the sky's as clear as a lake this morning, and things will be thawing out by noon. There'll be nothing to hold you, barring more snow."

She walked away, as if refusing further conversation about something distasteful to her. Gary wondered if he was correct in the impression that she would have welcomed all the snow the valley could hold.

There was little talk between them all that forenoon. Marci kept stepping outside the door to scan the dazzling white hills rolling away from the cabin, searching for signs of returning riders. Yet no hint of the result of last night's labor was forthcoming.

Tension piled upon Gary Randall. He tried to combat it by conjuring up pictures of the various persons he had met since striking Mountain Valley. He saw Travis Toll as a rugged, gray-haired giant of a man with fierce eyes and a chin held high. Lang Woodruff, he decided, must be Scotch—long and stoop-shouldered and sour-faced. Connecting Marci's face and figure with her voice was more difficult. Girls' voices didn't characterize their owners so well as men's—not at least to Gary's untutored ears. So in his mind she remained a very feminine presence, possessed of gentle, soothing fingers and moods as changeable as mountain weather.

Just before dark, the jingle of harness chain and spurs electrified both of the cabin's occupants. Instantly, the girl was running to the door to throw it wide and dash out. Gary struggled with a fierce desire to tear the bandage from his eyes and follow her. But a sense of caution kept him there on the edge of the cot, listening hard.

Horses' hoofs crunched in the frozen undersnow. Travis Toll's deep tones rumbled a greeting. Sounds of low talk, of leather squeaking and horses blowing heavily, came to Gary's ears. Then suddenly he stiffened, as Marci cried:

"*Dad!* Rusty—he's been hurt!"

"Not hurt," Toll ground out through clenched teeth. "Killed! He—his hoss slid down a bank on top of him. Broke his neck. He died on the way back."

Lang Woodruff swore. "That hoss didn't slide, and you know it! He was knocked off the ledge by some dirty bushwhacker that come up behind him. It's murder!"

CHAPTER III

GUN LAW

GARY sat there rigidly, as the T-Down Combine filed in. Of the ten men who had left, only three had come back with Travis Toll. The rest had gone home to their worried families.

Little more was said about Rusty's death. Plainly, words had passed between Toll and the others. Gary's mind filled in the blanks in his knowledge of the tragedy. Again the cowmen wanted to have a showdown with Fargo, and once more Travis had somehow held them back. But the death of the young red-headed puncher had put them all in a black mood.

Doc Magnus came wheezing in and over to Gary's bunk. "Let's have a look at them eyes," he growled. Deftly, he removed the bandage. Gary grunted, as agony shot through his head. Light seemed to burst before his pupils like exploding stars.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with you," the medico declared with satisfaction, "except that you want a lot of rest. Just take it easy and keep that bandage—" In the middle of replacing the gauze, he stopped short.

A fist had pounded commandingly on the door. Through the hush that pervaded the cabin sounded Toll's footfalls. The door creaked open.

"Fargo!" Travis Toll spat out the word as if it had a bitter taste. "You got some nerve, comin' here after last night!"

"What happened last night is none of my affair," snapped a nasal voice. "If you can't build drift fences so they'll stand a forty-mile wind, that isn't my fault. We're here on business."

Boots drummed through the cabin as the Combine men tramped belligerently past their leader into the snow-covered yard. "Business like what you had with Rusty Spigler?" demanded Lang Woodruff in choked tones.

"Spigler?" echoed Adam Fargo.

"Don't try to tell us you didn't know he was murdered!" doc cracked out.

"You bullheaded nesters can build a lot out of nothing," Fargo snapped. "I know nothing about Spigler nor your damned fences. I'm here to make you an offer. Sheriff Galt and Dred Marlin, here, will back me up when I tell you I was with them all last night. Likewise they'll back me up in the legality of my offer."

"Let's have it," Travis drawled. "It might afford us a couple of laughs."

Gary Randall trembled with the overpowering urge to rip off his bandage and get into this. The brash arrogance of Fargo penetrated his senses like a saw-edged knife.

"You've got a thousand acres here," a new voice said. "My books show you never proved up on them, Toll. That makes the land open to resettlement. Fargo has filed on this spread and he has the right to demand that you evacuate. But rather than shut you out cold, he's going to pay you. I advise you to accept his proposition."

Fargo interrupted him. "I figure your work and improvements should be worth a dollar an acre," he stated. "Say twelve hundred for the whole kit and caboodle. I'll take your cattle off your hands for two bucks a head. You'll find that's better than letting them starve—you'll have no graze for the critters after you sell out."

"You make us the same offer?" Woodruff inquired with exaggerated politeness.

"The same—a dollar an acre, two dollars per steer. You've got until tomorrow night to accept my offer. After that, Sheriff Galt will put you out by force, if necessary."

Gary could not stand it any longer. A life of action had put steel-spring nerves into him that could be held down only so long. With a sweep of his hand, he ripped off the bandage, stood up, swaying before the hearth. For a moment he was unable to see anything but a crimson haze that swirled about him. Then things began to settle into definite outlines.

A girl's form, still blurry, stood in the portal. Beyond, in the snow, were the shapes of several men. Gary turned and sought his guns and boots.

Lang's rising voice sheered the log walls like a pistol shot. "If ever I saw a skunk in man clothes, it's you, Fargo!" he ripped out. "Dammit, there's only one poison for the likes of you, and I've got six doses of it on my hip. I got a mind to give you your needin's right now!"

"You're welcome to try, Woodruff," Sheriff Galt cracked out. "We'll have three slugs through you before you draw your iron!"

In the next moment, a quiet voice brought the six in the yard about, as Gary Randall shouldered past Marci Toll.

"Fine talk for a lawman, sheriff!" he scorned. "Inciting a man to gunplay against odds. Is that one of the chores you're paid to do?"

TO Gary's swimming vision, the sheriff was hardly more than a paunchy, black-suited hulk with pasty-white features. A star sparkled on his lapel. On Gary's own shirt, a United States marshal's badge gleamed. Galt was staring at the insignia in open surprise. Quickly he recovered his arrogant demeanor.

"I don't savvy what a United States marshal's doing here, but I do know your say-so don't amount to shucks with me," he blustered. "Stick your nose in this and you'll wish you hadn't. Your jurisdiction don't include refereein' land disputes."

"Don't you count too much on that, sheriff," Gary said gently.

Adam Fargo drew his glance as he shifted impatiently at the head of his horse. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in the work-worn clothing of a cowman. He might have been any T-Down neighbor by the outdoor look of him; but his hard, bright eyes were filled with ruthless greed, and his mouth pulled down cruelly at the corners.

"To the devil with all this," he finally rapped out. "You've got your marchin' orders, Toll. Get it out of your head that I'm doing something beyond the law. Dred Marlin's books will show where I stand."

"I'd like to look at those books," Gary drawled. "I'll bet the writin's a little blurry around certain dates."

Fargo's big head pivoted, and Gary could almost feel the heat of his gaze.

"Understand this, marshal," Fargo fired at him, "I don't give a damn for your tin star. Poke around in my affairs and you'll find the badge ain't broad enough to protect you from a little unpleasantness." With a quick tug of his hands, he brought the lanyard string of his Stetson up tight under his chin. "I'll be seeing you tomorrow, Toll. Do some tall thinkin' between now and then."

His turning was the signal for Sheriff Galt and the land agent, Dred Marlin, to stalk to their own ground-tied ponies. Without another word, the group loped off into the melting snow fields. At last, with

the spell of Fargo's presence still on them, Travis turned a shaggy head.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow when we've rested," he muttered to Lang and Doc Magnus. "You boys take Rusty into town, will you? Get in touch with Parse Williams about speakin' some words at the cemetery in the morning. Thanks for your help with them cow critters of mine."

His gray-stubbled face was creased in grim lines when he went inside. Doc and Lang were moving somberly toward their mounts as Gary Randall followed the rancher and Marci into the house.

Travis, bigger even than the lawman had imagined, lumbered toward the fireplace to stand with his mighty shoulders tilted against the stonework. His gaze was darkly on Gary's face. Marci attracted Gary's attention by striking a match and touching it to the wick of an ornamental brass lamp on the big dining table. With the amber glow mounting about her, she made a picture to tighten Gary's throat.

She was tall and full-bosomed, grace and vitality flowing in every line of her slender figure. The flush of health was on her smooth-skinned rounded cheeks. But her big eyes, catching golden glints from the lamp, were dark with emotion. Suddenly she looked up squarely into Gary's admiring eyes.

The marshal was saved a moment of embarrassment by Toll's stolidly voiced query: "So you're a deppity marshal, eh? Who you looking for, Randall?"

The question was bluntly put, and Gary gave an equally straightforward reply. "For a train robber and murderer named Con Morgan. Would you know where I could find him? We've got word he's living in Slippery Rock." His glance stayed riveted to the other's features. Pain had almost left his eyes, now, and increasing clarity of vision came with every passing moment. And from that clear sight grew the certainty that the face of Travis Toll, though marked by the passing years, was the same as the one on the dodger tucked into his wallet.

No emotion showed on Toll's seamed features. But into the hush fell his quiet words, that Gary was to remember long after he had sought his blankets: "Con Morgan? Yes, I can take you to him. First thing in the morning, after we bury pore Rusty Spigler. But you'll have to excuse me now, son. I'm gettin' along, and I need my sleep after a twenty-hour stretch in the saddle."

CHAPTER IV

GRAVE OF A KILLER

GARY slept on trigger edge, conscious that Toll's game, if he were really the murderer, might be to escape during the night, fighting his way through the melting snow packs in the pass. But morning came uneventfully. After a solemn breakfast, the three of them saddled and rode to town.

Rusty Spigler's funeral took place about noon, in the little graveyard on the hillside above Slippery Rock. Here the snow had completely melted, save for wedge-shaped patches in the shadows of the larger headboards. Only twenty or thirty cattlemen and their families were present, but the genuine grief in their faces told its own story of the young puncher's popularity.

In the clear, cold air, Gary stood with bared head, and heard the black earth rattling on the pine box as the service ended. His thoughts were somber, disturbing. The certainty had taken roots in him that Travis

Toll was Con Morgan. And yet remorse stabbed him at the idea of taking the kindly old cowman back to the noose awaiting him in Cheyenne. And there was the troubling recollection that, but for Toll, he himself would have died that night in Granite Gorge.

After the funeral, Toll sent Marci home alone, overriding her objections impatiently. Then he turned quietly to Gary.

"Well, let's be gettin' on. I promised to take you to Con Morgan. So if you'll jest follow me—"

With a puzzled frown pulling at the bridge of Gary's nose, he followed the cattleman across the cemetery. Near the fence, in the shade of a sprawling black oak, Travis stopped beside a weathered headboard.

"There he lays, marshal," he said quietly. "But I reckon you're a few years late, by the date on the marker!"

Gary caught a breath. Slowly his eyes went from Toll's stony features to the leaning slab of thick pine. In crude characters a simple epitaph had been carved:

CON MORGAN
Born 1855
Died 1887
Found Froze To Death On This Spot After The Big Die

The words burned themselves into Gary's brain. Morgan—*dead!* He looked up blankly at the rancher. Toll avoided his eyes.

"Morgan was a hard-drinkin' fool," he said. "He left the saloon drunk one night, in the middle of the worst storm this country ever saw. It snowed six feet that night before it let up a few hours. By then he was buried proper. We never found the body till spring."

Gary did not miss the hesitancy of Travis' speech. And as he stared at the crude marker again, doubt leaped through him. "It looks like I could've saved myself a heap of trouble, doesn't it?" he muttered. "So Morgan's been dead all these years! But of course I'll have to have the body disinterred to check that it's really my man. According to records, there's certain characteristics. Then, too, I want to know that there's really a body there."

"You—you mean this ain't proof enough for you?" Toll licked his lips.

"No. The government wants more proof than a rickety headboard. Well, thanks for your help anyway, Toll. I've got to be finding a coroner, now."

Travis Toll watched as Gary turned and started back across the graveyard. The rancher's shoulders slumped as though age had suddenly laid its hand on him. Then his voice reached out to halt the lawman.

"All right, Randall—you've got me. There's nothin' in that grave but a pair of rusty six-guns. I'm Con Morgan."

GARY did not pull his guns on the old outlaw. Toll was unarmed, and even so, he seemed in no mood to try an escape. Gary faced his prisoner with sober features.

"I'm sorry, mister," he said sincerely. "You aren't the kind of man I came here looking for. But there's that murder. I reckon you've got to go back and stand trial."

Travis nodded gloomily. "Talk's cheap," he said bleakly, "but I want to say my two-bits' worth before you slap me behind bars. I never done that killin'. I was in the railroad job, yes. But against my will.

Marci's maw was sick, and I had to have money for hospital bills and doctor's fees if she was to live. The only way I could get that money was dishonestly. Somehow I fell in with them other boys, and they propositioned me to help 'em. At the last minute, with the train rattlin' down the tracks, I knowed I couldn't do it. But they wouldn't let me back out. During the job, one of 'em killed that brakeman. He gave out my description before he died, and it wasn't long before they had the job nailed onto me. But by that time I'd took my family and lit out. We landed here in this valley, the first white men to settle in it."

"And the grave?" Gary asked.

"I thought I could use that as a sort of insurance, if they ever came here lookin' for me. But Morgan's grave was only the first I was to dig that winter. My wife died soon after we got here." With an upward tilt of his long chin, he smiled. "So that's the picture, marshal. We've got a fust-class jail in Slippery Rock, and I reckon you'll be wanting to use it till the gorge is passable."

Gary weighed him long and carefully before he replied. "I won't need a cell for you, Travis," he decided. "You couldn't leave the valley anyway, and I'll be glad to take your word that you won't try. Seems to me you're more important to the T-Down Combine right now than you are to me. Go on back to the house. I'll be along before dark."

Toll's eyes glistened with gratitude. He put out his massive, work-scarred hand. "You've got a heart back of that badge of yours," he offered gratefully. "I'm beholden to you, Randall."

"Forget it," Gary said uncomfortably. "It's mighty small thanks to a gent that saved my life. I only wish I could do more."

But there was a little more he could do, and after Toll mounted and rode off, he set about doing it. He entered town and located the land office by the sign over the door. It was plain to him that Fargo's plans centered largely around Dred Marlin's books. He wanted to endow his land piracy with the whitewash of legal sanction. Forgery was his way of gaining that end.

The tiny, log-walled office was full of the warm redolence of burning ironwood and glowing pipes. Two men sat with their boots on the shiny fender circling the cast-iron stove. One was Dred Marlin, a big calabash pipe clenched between his yellowed teeth and his gray woolen sleeves rolled back to expose hairy, thick forearms. The land agent turned to face the door as Gary entered.

The other man was smaller than Marlin, tailor-made clothes covering his wiry frame. He had a long, pointed jaw and a beak of a nose looming above a thin mouth.

Marlin took the calabash from his lips. "Howdy, marshal," he greeted. "I hear they planted Spigler this morning. Too bad. Nice feller."

"Too nice to be bushwhacked, they tell me," Gary countered. He met the land agent's mocking stare coldly. "Let's get down to business. I came here for a look at those books of yours."

The sharp-featured man with Marlin cut in quickly. "You'll need a court order to look at those records," he said, shoe-button eyes snapping. "They're government property."

"And I'm a government agent," Randall said brusquely. His eyes flicked over the stranger. "By your interest in this case and the insignia

in your buttonhole, I take it you're a railroad man. Does that account for your not wanting me to look inside the ledgers?"

"I'm Led Kennedy. What of it?" was the angry retort.

GARY moved down the counter, unhurriedly flung the drop gate aside. "Nothing," he smiled quietly. "Only, it'll take more than a tinhorn railroad agent to keep me away from these books!" Quickly he stooped beneath the counter to drag out the pile of massive, black ledgers reposing on a shelf.

Led Kennedy was staring at him over the barrel of a .45 when Gary raised again. Fury crackled in Kennedy's dark eyes. He got up quickly and planted himself across the counter from Gary. The marshal's nerves leaped with a quick, raw tingling. He hadn't figured Kennedy for this much fight—or bad judgment. But it showed him clearly how far the thing had gone with the Fargo crowd.

"Put 'em away, feller!" snapped the railroad man. "I meant what I said."

Dred Marlin got up hurriedly, a little anxious now, his arrogance gone. "Take it easy, Led!" he cautioned. "Fargo wouldn't want no gunplay."

"He's gonna get it, if this tin-star shorthorn don't get smart," rapped the other. "You hear what I said, Randall? Put 'em away!"

Gary shrugged. He bent to replace the ponderous books. Swiftly, then, he heaved them across the counter, full into Kennedy's face. The Colt crashed, and lead burrowed into the ledger that shielded Gary from the shot. Immediately he was flashing into action.

His long legs bent and straightened like catapults, punching him over the counter like a pole vaulter. Kennedy swore, staggered back under the weight of a hundred pounds of ledgers. His dark, evil face was twisted as he brought the revolver around once more.

Randall's fist made a short arc that had its termination at the point of the railroad man's chin. Even as his knuckles chopped into yielding bone, Kennedy fired a second time. The slug stung Gary's cheek as it whistled past. His eyes went hard. He whipped a savage right into Kennedy's face, wincing as teeth cut his fist. Kennedy gasped and fell back, pawing wildly at the marshal for support. Gary took a handful of black silk tie and dragged the agent back.

With an effort that brought a grunt from his lips, he drove his fist into the man's stomach. Kennedy's face became the sickly color of a toad's belly. His eyes bugged out like grapes, and he went down in a writhing heap.

Gary swung on Marlin, who stood frozen before the stove, watching the struggle. "Tell this rat, when he wakes up, that if he ever crosses my trail again I'll cut him to coyote meat and then arrest him for the shots he just took at me," he cracked out. "He and Fargo and the rest of you have had your time to howl. Now we'll check up and see how much light your doin's can bear."

Marlin, scared and angry, listened sullenly. "You can't take them books with you, marshal," he faltered. "It . . . it ain't legal."

"But I'm doing it," Gary pointed out coldly. "I'm going to spend the afternoon poring over them, and I expect to find plenty. And listen, Marlin: There's such a thing as a man easing his own stretch in the pen for a deal like this by turning State's evidence. If you've got any

idea that I may find gaps in your bookkeeping, I advise you to show up at the T-Down Ranch about eight tonight. I'll put in a word for you if you can help us any."

Marlin shook his bullet head doggedly. "You're barkin' at the wrong 'coon," he insisted. "You'll find everything as it ought to be."

"Maybe," Gary conceded. "But don't forget my offer."

CHAPTER V

WHEN THE WOLF PACK RUNS

RELATIONS were much changed among Gary, his prisoner, and Marci when the lawman returned to the T-Down ranchhouse just before sundown. Travis Toll was quietly jovial, in high spirits. He had strapped on his guns for the first time in many years. The strain of endlessly waiting had snapped; the change brought relief to him, rather than despair.

But Marci Toll avoided Gary's eyes and spoke distantly to him. Womanlike, she seemed to blame him for her father's plight. Gary was forced to the admission that her coolness hurt. It brought to mind the contrast between the care she had given him during those days of blindness, and the way he was repaying her.

But his first glance inside the land-office books restored his spirits. Toll bent over his shoulder, squinting through thick reading glasses at the discrepancies Gary pointed out.

"Clumsiest job I ever saw!" the lawman exulted. "Look at those erasures. Marlin must have been drunk when he made them. Look at this place where he's altered the description of Lang Woodruff's land. 'From the burned oak, seventeen miles north, more or less, to the confluence of Salt Creek and Dutchman's Gully.' He's tried to make that seven into a four. But the ink he used is fresher and darker than the original. And here's another—"

For an hour they went over the falsified records, finding new, incriminating evidence with the turn of each page. Toll began to chuckle.

"No wonder Fargo didn't want you to take the ledgers!" he declared. "This is enough to put him in Sundance. He tried to run his bluff too far."

Gary looked up swiftly as hoofbeats swelled from the night. His eyes found the marble clock above the fireplace. "Eight-fifteen," he murmured. "That would be Dred Marlin."

"Or Adam Fargo," Marci reminded quietly. "Tonight's the deadline for us to get out."

Her words created renewed tension in the cabin. Gary drew his gun and stood beside the door. With the first rap, he slid it open. Then he pushed his gun back into leather and pulled the door wide to admit Dred Marlin.

Marlin stood mauling the brim of his Stetson, ill at ease under the gazes of the three. Liquor fumed about him and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. "All right!" he blurted suddenly. "What do you want with me?"

"Thought it over like I told you, I see," Gary remarked. "You're wise. That book on the table can put you back of the gray walls for a long time. This way, maybe you'll get off a little easy."

"Get to it," the land agent growled sullenly. "What am I supposed to do? Break down and plead for mercy?"

Gary's face hardened. "Exactly. And in writing. There's pencil and paper on the table. Sit down and write a complete confession of your

part in this racket and tell what you know about Fargo."

Dred Marlin's chin shook. "You think I'm crazy?" he demanded hoarsely. "Fargo would kill me when he saw that paper! I . . . I'd ruther go to the pen."

"Fargo won't see the paper until I have him locked up," Gary promised.

But Sheriff Galt's in it too! He'd gun us all down before he'd take Fargo—"

"Fine!" Gary drew him toward the table. "Put that down, too. Galt will never have the chance to arrest anybody again. I'm planning to take him in custody myself. And you might tell us what you know about Rusty Spigler's death."

Marlin licked at his wide lips and spoke in a husky whisper: "Kennedy done it! Rusty caught him cuttin' wire. Kennedy slugged him with the cutters and then framed a fall for him."

"Kennedy, huh?" ground out Travis Toll. "Put that down, quick, feller. Then I'm gonna go kill me a railroad agent!"

Marlin began to write. In loose, sprawling characters he penned the kind of confession that would imprison and hang men. When his signature was planted at the end of three sheets, Gary signed it as a witness, and had Toll and Marci add their names. Then he folded the paper.

"You can go back now," he told the trembling land-office man. "Don't worry. I'll have the hecoons in jail by tomorrow night."

Marlin wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his Mackinaw. "That's a promise!" he croaked. Abruptly, he put on his hat and made for the door. He flung it open—and died before he could take another step.

GARY RANDALL could only stare as Marlin staggered back, blood spouting from his head and breast. A second later, the roar of concentrated gunfire rolled through the portal. The land agent was borne back by the hail of lead, to crash against the table and sprawl among the litter that slid from it as it collapsed.

The continued rattle of rifle fire electrified Gary. Two strides carried him to the door, which he slammed shut and bolted. The glass in the windows shattered. Travis was yelling something as he sprang for a rack of rifles at the side of the hearth. Gary spun, starting for the lamp to put it out. Shock struck him. The coal oil had spread over the floor when the lamp broke, releasing a sheet of yellow-and-blue flame that licked hungrily at the dry planks. There was time only to grab a blanket and fling it over the fire before he ducked and crawled to a window.

Out there in the gloom, five guns were pouring out lead as fast as expert marksmen could pump Winchesters and trigger. Gary raised his borrowed .30-30 above the sill and took aim. Something froze within him as he recalled the last time he had fired a gun.

He choked that momentary fear sternly. The shot he sent forth crashed into the rock rim surrounding the well and went wailing off into the night. It caused the gunman hunkering in its shelter to hold his fire for a while. Gary's eyes rummaged through the ranch yard litter: A flat-bed wagon, corded wood stacked neatly in long lines, one corner of the barn that projected into his vision. And as he watched, apprehension came to life in him. There were seven or eight men out there!

The men drew rein before the saloon and hands went to holsters as they made last-minute plans for their attack.

Every vantage point seemed to hold its concealed gunman.

Lead winged past his head, so close he caught his breath. He drew aside. It was when he glanced over at Toll that he saw the thing that made his blood run cold.

The flames hadn't been choked by the blanket. They had set fire to it, and made the table a pile of blazing tinder. The floor itself was being eaten by the greedy flames. The place was on fire, and they were cut off from escape.

Gary called out to the old rancher. Toll swore softly when he realized their predicament. Instinctively each man glanced at Marci. It was of the girl that they were thinking, more than themselves. She seemed to sense their concern, for her cheeks colored angrily.

"Don't sit there staring!" she cried. "Give them back what they're giving us. I'll try to hold the fire down—"

HER courage gave them the impetus they needed to plunge back into the fight. On his third shot, Gary drew blood. One of the gunmen tumbled from where he had lain behind a bale of hay on the wagon. Travis' keen aim knocked the rifle out of the hands of the man who lay back of the well, putting him out of the fight for good.

They fought now with increased fury, conscious that the renegades could lie doggo and wait until they were smoked out. When that time came, Gary wanted the odds cut down by a whole lot. But always there was the scorching heat of the

flames at his back, a building roar and crackle and dense clouds of smoke that stifled and brought tears from his eyes.

Toll coughed rackingly. Gary heard Marci sobbing as she crawled about, trying to slosh buckets of water over the conflagration. Suddenly there was a rending sound from the cealing. One swift glance told Gary that the ridge pole, a massive beam shiny with pitch, was almost burned through. Sagging badly, it was on the point of letting the whole roof cave in upon them.

"Time's up, folks!" he called out hoarsely to the others. "Better to take our chances out there than be crushed and burned alive. We'll go through the door one at a time. Head for the barn and don't stop running."

Marci held a rifle when she joined them there beside the heavy front door. Gary Randall's hand went down to grip hers, and through the impulsive grip he felt her cool courage. Her eyes met his in waiting trust, trust that fired him with new vigor for the showdown ahead.

He flung back the bolt, gripped the handle. "Ready?" he whispered.

"Ready!" was the answer.

But even as he stood with his weight pulling back on the door, the crashing of rifles outside was redoubled. Men shouted and cursed and horses stamped nervously. Gary locked gazes with Toll. Then he was inching the door back to peer out. In a flash, he had thrown it wide and sprung into the yard with rifle leaping to his shoulder.

Travis' shout split the gun sounds: "Jehoshaphat! If it ain't the T-Down Combine on the prod. Up an' at 'em boys, and the devil take the hindmost!"

CHAPTER VI

HELL'S SADDLE LEGION

FIVE riders plunged from the gloom, rawhiding through the yard with spitting Colts. At the swift change of scene, the Fargo crowd hit leather and raced for the darkness beyond the barn. It had all taken place so unexpectedly that Gary had time only to go down on one knee and pull a bead on one of the departing renegades. His shot took the man in the shoulder, screwing him around in the saddle. But the rider grabbed hold of the nubbin and was still spurring desperately when he disappeared.

Lang Woodruff and portly Doc Magnus flashed by, tailed by three other ranchers. One more Fargo man was chopped from the saddle by their bullets, and then the yard emptied itself of riders and the three on the doorstep moved hurriedly away from the burning house. The roof timbers gave way just then, and the upper portion of the house sank into the flames with a crash and a shower of sparks.

Within a few minutes, the cowmen were straggling back. Lang lit down at the point where Gary and Travis had grouped the dead renegades. Coldly, he eyed the pair.

"Tallied another of 'em out in the gullies," he grunted. "That makes four wolves that've paid for your place bein' burned."

"Five," Toll corrected glumly. "Dred Marlin lays inside. They cut him down before they went to work on us. But they ain't none of 'em Fargo's right-hand men. What brings you boys here?"

Woodruff's gray eyes lifted off across the valley. "It's been like this all up the line," he said grimly. "Mebbe not so bad. They shot the hosses in my corral and burned my

winter hay. Doc lost his outbuildings, and they shot his place up some. The rest of 'em had the same stories when they rode down to meet us." Now his gaze locked fiercely on Travis Toll. "Well, you old mossyhorn, are you with us or not? Because we're ridin' to Slippery Rock tonight for the showdown!"

"With you!" Toll said stoutly, and Marci's hand slipped through his arm with the words. "I'm with you till the last cap is cracked. There's nothin' to hold me back now. Let's slope!"

Gary watched them somberly as they grabbed up their trailing reins. "Just a minute," he halted them. "I figure this fight is partly mine. I've got a sort of professional interest in it. And it goes against the grain to see you rush in bullheadedly and bite off more'n will make easy chewin'."

"Hod dang it!" doc groaned. "Now it's him preachin' the go-easy trail to us. What's on your mind, marshal?"

Gary looked up at them, frowning. "You're aiming to do this the hard way. Why not make things easy for yourselves? Dred Marlin put a valuable weapon in our hands. We've got it in his writing that Led Kennedy murdered Rusty. That confession may save us a gun fight."

"Don't see what you're drivin' at," Toll said dubiously.

"I'm banking that Fargo would prefer a prison sentence to hanging, or being shot resisting arrest," Gary explained. "I'll put it up to him—surrender Kennedy to us, and we won't get too curious about who shot Marlin. We'll arrest him, sure. But there's no murder against him that I know of. If he's smart, he'll take my offer."

"You don't know Fargo," Woodruff protested.

"All right!" Gary said impatiently. "If he refuses my offer, *bueno!* You boys will back me in arresting him. I'll deputize the lot of you."

"Puttin' it thataway," Toll consented, "I don't see how we can go wrong. Find you a hoss, friend. Time's a-wastin'."

Gary saddled his bronc and rode back. "Where do you figure he'll be?" he asked.

Lang Woodruff pursed his lips in thought. "It ain't ten o'clock yet. He spends most of his evenin's at the Blackjack, drinkin' and schemin' with Galt and Kennedy. Like as not, he's there now. Lead away, Randall!"

Gary waved his hand in a gesture that sent them all spurring from the yard. The last thing he saw, as his horse carried him swiftly into the hills, was Marci's pale face turned up to him, tears brimming in her eyes, but a smile on her lips.

A WHITE moon that was like a chip of glacial ice flooded the streets with cold light when the cattlemen turned into Slippery Rock. The roadway was a sea of mud from walk to walk. Sucking sounds arose at each lift of a pony's hoofs. The horses found room among a number already shivering at the hitch racks, and Gary halted the men at the swinging doors of the bar.

"Don't go in there wild-eyed and looking for trouble," he admonished them sternly. "While I locate Fargo, the rest of you spread out through the crowd. Herd all of them you can out of the saloon. Don't pull your hardware until you see it's got to be done." He loosened his own guns in their holsters, stuffed his gauntlets under gun belts. "All right, let's go," he said briefly.

Their entrance was quiet and unobtrusive, but a quick tension leaped

through the place like an electric charge. Word flowed down the bar that the T-Down Combine was on the prod. Within a matter of seconds, the saloon fell quiet. Scared faces swiveled toward the seven who had entered, and spread out without a word. And that awkward silence told Gary Randall that Adam Fargo was in the room.

He made a slow advance through the tables, his boots the only sound in the bar, save for the solid click of billiard balls in the back of the place. Men were sliding away from him as he advanced. In his wake, he began to hear the tread of boots as the more cautious left the Blackjack. The mark of high danger was stamped on the scene.

And then Gary saw Adam Fargo, Led Kennedy, and the sheriff, engaged in a game of pool in the corner. Five other men sat at a table near them. The eyes of each man clung to the lawman's advancing figure. Fargo was leaning over the table, cue in position for a shot. But from under his heavy black brows, tawny eyes kept vigilant watch. He straightened, as Gary stopped a few feet away. Then his glance flashed past him, taking in the hurried dwindling of the crowd, the desperate labors of the barmen who were taking the ornate mirror down against the possible onslaught of slugs.

"What's the game?" Fargo demanded peremptorily.

"The game," Gary said, "is up, as far as you're concerned. But I'm going to give you a break, Fargo. We're here to talk turkey."

Fargo's harsh laugh rang through the low-ceilinged room. "You're giving *me* a break!" he said mockingly. "Like how, marshal?"

Led Kennedy didn't laugh or even look as if he felt amused. His thin, swart features tightened.

"I don't reckon you've had time to hear that your men bungled the job," Gary went on. "They killed Dred Marlin, but not until after he'd talked plenty and signed a confession. Likewise, his books are legal dynamite that I can use to blow you all to hell."

Sheriff Galt tossed his cue to the table angrily. "I've put up with enough of your meddling, Randall," he snapped. "Either you get out of town tomorrow, or you'll find Slippery Rock mighty hot for you from here on out. Savvy?"

"Don't scare me like that, sheriff," Gary grinned. "I've got your name down in the confession too. I can have you both put in Sundance for ten years. And I'm going to see that Kennedy swings for Spigler's murder!"

The cigar Kennedy held in his teeth bobbled for an instant. But he recovered his pose of confidence swiftly. "You lying tin-star lawman!" he snarled. "You've run your bluff too far. That's slander, sheriff. We can lock him up for that!"

"Keep your shirt on!" Randall bit out. "Fargo, I said I'd make you a bargain. I'll swap you your life for a peaceful surrender. Turn Kennedy over to me without making a play to save his hide, and we won't get overly curious about who ordered Dred Marlin's death. You'll go to the pen—no power on earth can save you from that—but you won't swing. That goes for Galt, too. What's it going to be?"

A dead silence possessed the saloon. Here and there, among tables and chairs, Combine men waited like hawks. Fargo looked like a cornered lion. His eyes searched Gary's face.

"You're lying," he said huskily. "Marlin wouldn't talk, he had nothing to tell."

Kennedy stepped back from the

table, hands gripping his thighs, above holstered Peacemakers. "You're letting him run a sandy on you, Fargo!" he snarled. "What are we waiting for? Let's give him his needin's!"

The five gunmen who had been playing cards nearby had stood up unobtrusively and joined the leaders. They were narrow-eyed and ready.

"I'm through stalling," Gary spoke impatiently. "The paper and books are in my possession, and they'll do all I say they can. Put it like this, Fargo: You're under arrest right now. Surrender, and you'll live; resist, and either I or the law will kill you. Make your play—now!"

Fargo avoided Led Kennedy's glance, darted a curious look at his men. "In that case," he said with a tight grin. *"Get him, boys!"* In one swift motion, he dropped to the floor.

GARY had halfway suspected some such treachery, and he was ready for it. Led Kennedy was the first to roll his Colts. Lead slapped a chair at Gary's side and missed him by an inch. His own .45s crashed hasty answer. One slug was a clean miss, but the second, fired too low, dug through the felt on the billiard table to gain new drive from the smooth slate beneath. It screamed up in a flat ricochet that ended in Kennedy's stomach. The railroad man choked a scream out and fell back. Gary's third shot finished him.

Travis Toll and the others were creating a hell of their own by pouring concentrated fire from all over the room into that tight corner that held the renegades. Half the lamps in the place had snuffed out in the initial gun concussion. In the gloomy half light, gun flame stabbed and recoiled like the scarlet tongues of writhing snakes.

Gary flung up a chair as shelter and gained the lee of a roulette board. Chips splattered across the room as lead swept the table. Gary was rolling his guns with steady rhythm, watching the desperate attempts of the land-hogging pack to fight their way out of the corner. They battled with the grim recklessness of men who know that surrender means death.

Travis Toll, the man who had not toted hardware in fifteen years, fought like a great, gray ghost moving among the tables. "Lay out the lead, boys!" he sang in his rumbling voice. "This is for Rusty!"

Sheriff Galt stood erect during those first lead-screaming seconds; miraculously, he went unhurt. When he found strength to move, it was in an act typical of him. His bulky form slid down the wall toward a window, seeking escape. With his head and shoulders already through it, he took a slug in the back and finished his escape in hell.

The saloon was becoming a veritable abattoir. Lead had put down so many of Fargo's crew that the others were on the point of running for the fancied safety of the rear door. Adam Fargo alone kept his cool head and steady gun. His booming voice flogged the others on.

Gary was suddenly sick of the smell of cordite, the crash of guns and the groaning of wounded men. Disregarding caution, he slipped from the wreckage of the roulette table toward Fargo's place. Lead sang about him, ripped through his hip once in a painful wound that shook, but failed to stop him. He limped on until Fargo's hunched form was before him.

"This is showdown, Fargo," he

called quietly. "Make your play!"

Adam Fargo swiveled, with guns held low and unwavering before him. Those yellowish orbs of his looked weirdly luminous.

Gary's long body twisted sideways, so that he offered a slender target. Even so, Fargo's bullets scored him front and back, one of them digging painfully at his wounded leg. Then Gary's own Colt spoke. He wasted no lead. Hatred and disgust rioted inside him, but their effect was to impart a savage deadliness to his aim.

Fighter to the last, Fargo lurched to his feet and tried to lock with Gary. Blood bubbled from a wound in his throat. His powerful body seemed to be trying to resist the admission that he was mortally hit. But that colossal pride could not hold his bulk erect once the shock of the slug took hold. Strength ebbed away from him. Twisting grotesquely, he fell, dead as he hit the floor.

FIGHT left the renegades with the sight of their leader down. Travis and Lang and the rest herded the remaining four into a huddle. But Travis Toll hung back as the sullen hardcases were marched from the saloon. In this moment of victory, he seemed to realize that things, for him, remained unchanged; he was a wanted man still.

Gary, weak and sick, had staggered to the bar and appropriated a bottle of brandy. Travis flashed him an ironic grin.

"Go easy on that stuff, marshal," he advised. "You got a desperate criminal on your hands now. I expect we'll be able to get through the Gorge in the mornin'."

"*We?*" Gary scowled. "You're not going anywhere. I'm leavin' soon as I can to make my report, but you'll still be here after I'm gone."

Toll's eyes searched his face. "Talk sense," he spoke jerkily. "You got a duty to that badge, ain't you?"

"Seeing justice done is my duty," Gary told him, after a long pull at the bottle. "Running you in ain't my idea of justice. I've got the feeling that you told me the story of that railroad job better than the dodger does. My report will concern a grave in the Slippery Rock graveyard, where Con Morgan finished his gunsmoke trail a long time back. Case against you is dismissed, Travis."

He saw tears spring into the old cowman's eyes, felt the man's horny palm groping for his hand.

"Lots of folks will be plumb sorry to see you leave, son," Travis spoke gruffly to hide his feelings. "You've got the kind of blood Mountain Valley needs."

Grinning ruefully, Gary glanced down at his sodden Levis. " 'Pears to me Mountain Valley's got a lot of that blood right now! I've got to follow my back trail to Cheyenne, but I don't figure to be away long anyhow. An' when I come back I'll be minus a badge and toting a bag of money to buy in on somebody's cow spread as a partner."

Travis reached for the bottle himself. "Might you be meaning the T-Down?" he inquired, a broad grin dawning on his kindly face.

"I might," Gary admitted. "Think Marci would object?"

"Marci? Marshal, your eyes must be a little foggy yet. She's had that look about her ever since we drug you in froze and blind. Shake on it, son. I'll soon have me a pardner, and you'll have yourself a wife!"

THE END.

With a churning half ton of berserk horseflesh under him, it was up to Sixty Johnson to show his friends that

BRONC RIDERS DON'T QUIT

BY C. WILLIAM HARRISON

THE swelling, full-lunged roar of the crowd, the wave and flutter of the banners over the arena, the smell of dust and leather and sweat, the expectant hush that fell over the grandstand as the announcer's strident voice came through the megaphone—these things filled the mind of Sixty Johnson as he hunkered there on the top rail of the bucking chute.

This last moment, jaded as he was by years on the rodeo circuits, he could feel the quick grip of excitement that lay a smother of silence over the crowd in the grandstand. Across the arena ranchers strained forward intently, ranch wives found their hands seeking the hands of their husbands, girls who had lived the last month for this holiday looked on, flushed, bright-eyed.

"Joe McMackin on Blue Tiger comin' out of Chute 3!" the announcer roared.

A sudden burst of yells followed from the grandstand.

"Ride 'im, Mack! This is payday!"

"Powder River! Let 'er buck!"

"Scratch and claw, 'cause you've picked a he-hoss!"

A big blue horse that was a devil on four legs exploded from the chute into the open. From the top rail, Sixty Johnson watched, mentally feeling the spine-jarring jolts Blue Tiger was giving his rider, faded blue eyes narrowly weighing the bronc rider's chances.

He didn't like what he saw. He'd topped horses like Blue Tiger. Killer all the way through, that horse. Hell on hoofs. The cinch hadn't been pulled tight enough, and the saddle had slipped back a little. Each buck was whipping the rider's back viciously. Mack couldn't stand much of that. Something had to give; bone and muscle weren't meant

to stand such a battering. Already blackness must be closing over the rider's brain. He was rocking slightly in the saddle. His legs were losing their grip on the slabby barrel of the bronc; you had to have strong legs to stay on a horse like Blue Tiger. The pick-up riders were closing in and one was already whirling his loop when McMackin was hurled from the saddle.

He struck the ground heavily. He tried to climb to his feet and that showed how dazed he was. He ought to have thrown himself flat to escape the murderous hoofs of the horse. Killer hoofs. One of them struck McMackin's shoulder, smashing the fallen rider back to the ground. Blue Tiger reared high into the air, forelegs pawing as he started to come down to crush the life from the huddled body. A girl screamed distantly, the sound slicing through the smother of silence. Everything seemed to stand still that moment. The pick-up rider's loop seemed to hang motionless in midair over the squealing horse. Then it dropped, caught, and the rope snapped taut to hurl the horse back to the ground to be held there by another rider who plummeted through the air to pin down Blue Tiger's head.

The silence held. There was something primival in this that bit deep into Sixty Johnson, the age-old fight of man pitted against beast. Riders had died trying to prove their supremacy over a half ton of pitching horseflesh; men had been thrown, beaten and battered to the earth just as had Joe McMackin. And for what? A sneer struggled to move Sixty Johnson's flat lips. What had he got out of following the circuits for fifteen long years? Only a few dollars, the memory of cheering crowds to show for an aching, battered body that had been aged far beyond his years.

But it would be different after this last ride he told himself almost savagely.

The announcer's voice rolled out from the megaphone. "Joe McMackin wasn't bad hurt, folks. Nothing serious, folks."

The plaudits of the crowd rose and fell. There was a flurry of activity around the saddling chutes where the horse handlers prepared for the coming events.

Johnson's eyes pulled around to see Sam Thacker coming around the corral toward him. Thacker's weathered face was taut, and there was a stiffness to his shoulders, a measured quality in his strides that spoke of slow-building anger.

When Thacker halted beside the chute, Johnson twisted around and said, "You make out all right, Sam?"

Sam Thacker nodded shortly, his lips flat and hard. "I bet every dollar you had, Sixty," he said.

"Against me?" Johnson pressed.

"Against you," Thacker said in a measured tone.

Silence fell between them. Distantly, Sixty Johnson heard the rolling boom of the announcer's voice.

"Watch Chute 7, folks. Sixty Johnson will be comin' out on that devil hoss, Moonlight. Keep your eyes peeled on number 7, folks."

Johnson shut the roar of the crowd from his mind. Again he felt the sneer twist his lips. There was a thin vein of contempt in the silence Thacker held. Johnson broke it to say, "You get odds, Sam?"

Thacker answered, "The betting's even. But you'll get a thousand out of the money you gave me to bet against you."

"That'll get me a piece of land and a few cows to start with," Johnson said. "A man is a damn fool to ride rodeo broncs for prize money."

"Yeah, a damn fool," Thacker agreed. "The smart man bets against himself, then lets himself get throwed. You played smart making me lay down your money against you, Sixty."

Behind Johnson, a man said from within the chute: "You ridin' this hoss, Sixty, or is your pants caught on a nail?"

SIXTY leaned down, cautious of a sudden lurch of the horse. The front cinch felt snug. He tested the bucking strap. It was tight enough to give the cruel pinch that would drive the horse mad.

The yells of the crowd had stilled now, expectantly. Sixty Johnson's lips curled. Waiting for another rider to have his guts churned up for the hundred dollars top prize.

The megaphone boomed: "Sixty Johnson on Moonlight—out of Chute 7!"

He eased himself gently into the saddle, adjusting his weight carefully. He felt the quivering of taut muscles under his legs as stirrup leather closed over his boots. The animal's back sagged down like a tempered steel coil. An ominous sign. Johnson readied himself. A few seconds of bucking to make the show look good, then he would relax the pressure of his legs. The pick-up riders would get to him before Moonlight's killer hoofs could do their murderous work.

He nodded a signal to the man at the chute gate. The gate swung open, and instantly the horse hurled forward in an explosion of violence. In the clear, Johnson's spurs ripped back, cutting crimson furrows from flank to shoulder.

The horse pitched, a half ton of flesh and bone gone berserk. The hoofs struck the ground in a spine-twisting jolt, and a paralyzing shock flashed through Sixty's body. Again the horse went up, twisting viciously as he fought to unseat the rider. In midair he swapped ends and struck the ground in staccato bouncing jolts, plowing in dizzy, wicked circles, squealing, trumpeting as he plunged across the arena.

Light and darkness flashed before Sixty's eyes with each jarring impact of churning hoofs. Grimly he counted the seconds, fighting the whip and twist of the thunderbolt between his legs. A man was a damn fool to let himself in for such punishment. What did he get out of it? The yells of a crowd that forgot him a moment after he was thrown; maybe a few dollars if he was lucky. But that wasn't all. Each smash of pounding hoofs made it seem like his insides were coming out. His body was whipped and snapped and jarred, wakening old pains, bringing new ones that were more acute.

And all for a few dollars. Johnson gritted his teeth against the splinters of agony that ripped through his body. To hell with that top prize money. If a gent was smart he could make his pile quick. Sixty Johnson was smart. He'd saved a thousand dollars out of fifteen years of hell on the rodeo circuits and it would make him another thousand in a few short seconds. All he had to do was loosen the grip of legs clamped around the barrel of the horse, and it was about time now. He'd let the horse throw him. It would be the first time he'd ever backed out on a fight, but what the hell? He'd have his pile made.

And what did riding a rodeo bronc prove? There are good horses and bad ones; the good horses can be gentled, and the bad have to be broke. Horses are just like men that way. You can count on a good man

the same as you can count on a good horse but a bad one—

Moonlight was an explosion of bone and muscle. He hurled himself through all the tricks of the outlaw bronc, pitching, twisting; he corkscrewed, swung his hind legs and sunfished. No man had to take that kind of a beating if he was smart. Agony wrenched Johnson's body. His thoughts were a blur of pain and anger and disgust. He'd given the crowd their show—now was the time to collect. He let his legs go limp, felt the saddle loosen under him.

BUT suddenly the horse ceased bucking. Trumpeting with rage, he threw himself back hard upon his tail into a deadly pinwheel that had been fatal to more than one broncbuster. A killer trick, swift, treacherous, murderous.

Only a bad horse would try a trick like that and, strangely during that fleeting second when Moonlight threw himself into that desperate backward somersault, Sixty Johnson knew that he had been about to stamp himself of the same breed—one who would win at any cost.

A burst of anger surged through Sixty. He threw himself clear of the horse, heard faintly the yells of horror from the grandstand change to yells of admiration. He was in the saddle the instant the horse regained its feet but Moonlight's insensate fury had burned itself out.

The pick-up men dragged Johnson out of the saddle. The ground lurched unsteadily under his feet and everything swam dizzily before his eyes. He felt sick and weak with the agony of tortured muscles. He started to fall but strong hands caught him and held him up, and he saw Sam Thacker's weathered face close before him. The taut lines had left Thacker's face.

Sixty Johnson said, "Only a damn fool rides rodeo broncs for what he can get in prizes."

Without smiling, Sam Thacker answered: "Sometimes the top prize is more than money, Sixty."

Silence fell between them, and Johnson was conscious of a warm uplift of spirit as he heard the cheers that swelled from the grandstand. He knew with dawning understanding that they weren't cheering him for the dangers he had risked or for the excitement he had given them, but because of an achievement of man over great odds.

He said. "It cost me a thousand dollars—fifteen years work—to find out, Sam."

Sam Thacker smiled then, and his grip on Sixty Johnson's arm strengthened.

He said quietly. "I think I knew you all along better than you knew yourself, Sixty. About that thousand dollars you gave me—I bet it against you, like you ordered. But it was against you losing, Sixty, not against you winning. Being a damn fool is one thing, but quitting a fight is something I reckon a bronc peeler can't learn very easy."

THE END.

With the Washoe country suffering from a scourge of ruthless murderers, it was up to Steve Alcorn to prescribe

Lead Poisoning for a SILVER SYNDICATE

BY ROLLAND LYNCH

CHAPTER I

CARGO OF DEATH

THE crimson clouds of fratricidal war had paled to silver with the sheathing of bloody blades at Appomattox, but a darker and more ominous storm brewed over the country. Political buzzards had gorged themselves on the spoils of the government, and now the country was faced with a staggering monetary deficit. The Union was bankrupt! Anxious officials scanned money horizons for possible aid. And they found it in a land they had for-

gotten during emancipation—the West!

The Washoe Range of Nevada was pouring forth millions of dollars of silver bullion daily. The newly appointed governor assured Washington that the silver mines were prepared to cover all drafts the treasury might draw.

The eastern portion of the nation took a deep breath. They were saved! But in the excitement, they forgot the hazardous land that lay between Virginia City and Washington. A land wide and untamed, knowing only holster law. A land of Piutes, pestilence and renegades. Secure officials did not realize it would take lives and fortunes to get the rich transports through. In their plea for quick money, they did not know that upon the shoulders of one young man would rest the fate of the nation. For to young Steve Alcorn, range-bred son of the bonanza king, John Alcorn, was intrusted the first delivery—a wagon train of bullion gathered from many mines, with Alcorn himself the heaviest donor.

And now as young Steve sat his horse here on the bank of the Missouri River, at the steamboat rendezvous, and watched the boxed bullion being loaded into the holds, he hewed to the same vigilance he had exercised on the trail. The long trek up the Humbolt River was done, but he must be doubly watchful now. His father had warned him that he had news of a powerful combine forming to keep the silver from going through. The utmost secrecy had been used in getting it out of the mining town.

Steve had announced his intention of going to San Francisco. He had ridden away, cut back through the hills to pick up the bullion train at midnight and join Black Mike Calenny who ran supplies into Virginia City. The silver had been loaded secretly and Black Mike had pulled his wagons out of town as if he were going for more supplies. The untroubled trip attested to the success of the ruse.

But Steve saw a warning in the very smoothness of this journey behind him. Somewhere along the route, the combine would have its trap. He hoped it would be soon; his nerves were ragged from anticipation. But this expectancy kept his haggard blue eyes sharp, and his vital energy close to the surface of his powerful body. Both range and mine life helped him stand this strain. He had been with his father in Virginia City long enough to learn the use of single jack and drill as aptly as he knew gun, rope and running iron. His handsome face was bronzed by range suns, and the seams in his brow were the brands of thoughtfulness and vigilance. The danger of this trip was a tonic, keeping him on edge; else he would have dropped from exhaustion long ago. He felt the responsibility of this chore, felt the surge of this history-making movement.

Now he was content to snatch a deep breath while the blue-clad soldiers crowding the steamboat's rail stood guard. He thrilled to the thought of the trip down the Big Muddy to the Mississippi and New Orleans, and the transfer of the bullion to an ocean-going vessel. Dismounting, he turned to the swart breed who had supplied his train with meat.

"Mike and I will straddle the paddle-wheeler from here on out," he explained. "See that my horse doesn't lose that left front shoe on the trip back."

THE breed grunted and turned away, leading the sorrel Steve had ridden. The young man joined Black Mike Calenny at the gangplank of the *Slocum*.

Mike shook his bullet-shaped head dubiously. "Wish I was going back with my crew," he said. "I've no love for a steam-swimming hammerhead." Nervously, he shifted a paper-wrapped package under his arm.

Steve laughed. "Afraid of a little plank like this?" He guided Mike up the runway to the deck.

The captain met them, his broad Irish face split in a wide grin. "Welcome aboard the *Slocum*, me byes! I'll warrant no pirate bottom's known a richer cargo."

"With luck—pirates won't," Steve said with a smile.

The captain sobered. "Aye, lad, aye. With luck. We'll shove off immediately. I'll feel safer in the center of the stream."

The challenge of a guard stilled them. Steve's hands dropped to his guns as he peered ashore. Two buckskin-clad figures stood under the muzzles of the soldiers' guns. One was a giant, dwarfing the small man beside him.

"My scalp-taking brother and his running mate," chuckled the captain and went down the gangplank, shouting: "Avast with them guns!"

Steve watched the skipper shake hands with the two mountain men, then he turned to Black Mike. The wagon master was eying the boat narrowly.

"Get into one of the cabins and lie down," Steve advised. "You'll be all right in a minute."

Mike turned into a companionway. Steve strolled aft as the captain returned and went directly to the pilot house. The hatches were battened, and the throaty whistle brought the hawsers and gangplank in. Bells rang and the paddle wheels slowly ground the *Slocum* off the bank and into the current. The signal sounded below again, and the boat began its shuddering forward progress.

Lurching from the unsteady and foreign footing, Steve made the aft rail. Behind the steamboat, the Missouri ran like a silver sword encased in a sheath of verdant green. The men ashore grew smaller, until a turn in the bank hid them from sight.

Steve turned from his contemplation of this departure from the land and looked forward. He started. Then he was rushing up the deck, shouting: "Wait! Mike! Don't jump!"

The huge wagon master had one leg thrown over the rail. He looked wildly at Steve, then catapulted himself from the boat.

The huge black men of the crew stampeded up, one of them shouting, "Man ova' board!" Steve led the crew and soldiers to the rear of the boat as bells rang and paddle wheels thrashed in reverse.

With headway checked and paddles stopped, the captain came stomping aft.

"My wagon master," Steve explained quickly. "I didn't think he was that scared."

The captain shrugged. "Some men aren't sea-going, me lad. The *Slocum's* safe as a cradle."

Steve waved down the raised army rifles. "Let him go," he said. He was at a loss to understand Mike's action. The giant had a reputation for courage. But there was no telling what fears lay inside a man.

THE steamer slid around a curve and hid Mike from sight. With typical river suddenness twilight took over. Then it happened.

Steve was conscious of a great lifting power beneath his feet. The whole boat was rising from the water and splitting apart. Realization that the boat had blown up hammered into Steve's concussion-shocked senses. Acrid smoke stung his nostrils. Steam was hot against his face. The vacuum created by the explosion pulled at him. Through the detonation sheered the screams of dying men. Steve felt himself reach a peak, then begin falling, his arms and legs flapping out of control.

Like a plummet, he hit the water and went down—down. Instinctively, he thrust out his hands and began to claw at the depth. It served to stop his downward progress and began lifting him to the surface.

With lungs screaming for air, arms outstretched, he shot upward. He crashed against something hard and unyielding. Frenzy gripped him. Caught beneath the boat's hull. If he didn't get air soon— That thought brought a return to sanity.

Using all his strength, Steve worked himself downward and to the left. When he could go no longer, he turned up. He dared not think he hadn't won clear of the wreckage. But he had, shooting out of the water up to his waist. He settled back and began to tread water, gulping in huge drafts of air. He paddled feebly to conserve what little strength was left him.

The river was a current-tossed mass of debris. The settling darkness prevented Steve from seeing if there were other survivors. He had little time to spare for an investigation. He must gain shore. Boots and guns and sodden clothes were pulling him down. He knew he could not afford the strength to wiggle out of them. Then a heavy object nudged him and he grabbed it thankfully. It was a huge box.

Thus supported, Steve made his way cross-current toward the shadow-blurred river bank. As he propelled his box slowly, his face was a bitter mask. Millions in silver bullion lay on the river bottom. It might never be recovered. It was lost to both the government and renegades. Some internal accident must have caused the explosion.

Steve's feet struck the ground, and wearily he staggered up in the oozing mud. He patted the box, then started and bent forward for closer inspection. This was one of the bullion cases! Yet it had floated! Impossible!

He turned and started out across the river. Against the falling night he could make out other bullion cases bobbing in the current as they were swept downstream. He was too stunned to think. It couldn't be true. The explosion had done something to him, wouldn't let his mind work and made his eyes do tricks.

Yet here beneath his very river-chilled hand was tangible evidence that his eyes saw aright; that his mind was functioning. Lips tight, he jerked out a gun and went to work ripping the boards with hammer and butt.

CHAPTER II

A THREAT AND A PROMISE

WEARILY Steve halted his attack on the bullion box. It floated; what was the use of looking inside. Half mechanically, he pulled the crate to higher ground and sat down on it. He knew no one had touched these boxes since leaving Virginia City. It would have been impossible for them to have been tampered with or interchanged en route. He could not have had the silver at any time. Perhaps this

trip of his was just a blind to cover the real shipment, and his father had not trusted even his own son with the details.

But Steve knew these fanciful deductions were wrong. The blowing up of the *Slocum* could not have been part of the plan. Secrecy would not carry that far.

Yet suddenly Steve knew no internal cause had blown up the steamer. The man who leaped the rail was responsible for the wreckage. Black Mike Calenny! That package under his arm; from its size and shape, it must have been dynamite! That accounted for the fear in Mike's eyes; fear that he would not get away soon enough. The fuse had been burning when he was at the rail. Black Mike had thrown Steve completely off guard. Undoubtedly he was one of the combine of which John Alcorn had warned, and had been sent to destroy all evidence of the theft.

Steve came to his feet. Being near the stern of the boat had saved his life. He had been on the edge of explosive forces. There might be others whose escape was as miraculous as his. He drew one gun and fired into the air. A dull click responded to his gesture. The river had dampened the powder in his shells. He holstered the weapon. The cartridges would dry out and he would need them when he caught up with Black Mike.

For long moments, Steve remained motionless, listening. No hail came to him. The silence was heavy, ominous.

With a last look at the scene which swirling waters of the Big Muddy had already cleared of debris, Steve started upriver to the place where Black Mike would have come ashore. He hoped to pick up the tracks there.

AS he walked, Steve pondered the empty bullion boxes. Empty crates clear from Virginia City! The vigilance and care he had taken of them; the way Black Mike had sided him so seriously all the way. It would be a joke if it weren't so tragic.

Steve was at a loss to figure out what happened back there at the teeming mining town. Had his father turned over the shipment to Black Mike Calenny, and then dropped from sight to allay suspision? Something had happened between the time Mike had taken over and Steve had joined him. There had been no guards; another measure to insure secrecy. One thought became firmly fixed in Steve's mind. Mike was but a pawn in this big game. He, Steve Alcorn, would make the combine pay for the destruction of the *Slocum* and the lives of innocent men.

Steve stopped short in his tracks as a harsh voice cracked out from its covert: "Stand where you are, mister! Hump, see if he's got shooting tools while I hold this bead between his eyes."

Steve stood stock-still as a small, agile buckskin-clad figure leaped from the river weeds. Star glow limned the man's bewhiskered face and sandy shoulder-length hair. A naked skinning knife was bound at his middle by a rawhide thong. He wore moccasins and tight-fitting leather trousers. His blouse, fringed down the sleeves, made up the typical mountain man's attire. He was one of the men the captain had gone ashore to see.

"If you're fond of your health, button, don't move," Hump advised. "My pard don't even trust himself, he's that disbelieving in human nature. Where you from and where you going?" He unbuttoned Steve's

gun belts. Then he was exclaiming: "This jigger is soaked!"

Steve did not bother to answer the talkative little man. He wondered if these two were part of the renegade combine. The skipper's brother stepped from the reeds. Of a gigantic size, he lumbered like a grizzly, his thick legs bowed under the heft of his massive, buckskin-clad shoulders. Huge, leather-fringed arms swung like pendulums as he came up. He, too, had a skinning knife leashed to his middle and from the same belt hung a scalp, with its tuft of coarse black hair.

"Give the young un a chance to explain, Denver," the small man said. "Looks mighty honest to me."

"Everybody looks honest to you," said Denver scornfully. "What happened yonder, mister?"

"The steamer *Slocum* blew up." Steve's voice was blunt.

The huge man gasped and stepped closer. Steve could make out his broad Irish features beneath the mat of whiskers.

"The steamer *Slocum*—gone? Cap O'Hara?" The emotion shaking the giant would have been impossible to simulate. It softened Steve's answer.

"I'm afraid they're all gone but me."

Denver's huge hand fastened to Steve's plaid shirt front. "Maybe you know how it was done," he accused heavily. "Tell it quick or I'll have your hair!"

Steve could see the depth of the man's grief. These brothers, mountain and river men, must have been close together despite their lives apart. The loss was great to this giant of the wilderness. Steve told what happened.

"I didn't have the silver to start with," he concluded. "I don't know what to think. I've got to get my hands on Black Mike."

Denver O'Hara still regarded Steve with suspicion. "How do I know you ain't the jigger who touched off the *Slocum?* If you can't prove—"

"I can," countered Steve harshly. "We'll find the tracks upriver where Mike crawled out."

Denver released Steve's shirt. "I'll give you a chance," he said. "But you better find those marks quick, or I'll scalp you sure."

"Denver'll do it, too," said Hump and pointed to the hair at his partner's belt.

Steve nodded. He could understand the worship of this small man for the giant; Hump's utter confidence that Denver O'Hara could do anything. The suspicion of the big man angered Steve, but he knew it was justifiable under the circumstances.

"Let's go," Steve said, and moved forward. "Mike couldn't have got much of a start. He'll be traveling slow figuring everyone is gone. I'll have further proof when I catch him."

He led the way up the river's edge. A tawny moon rose to put its ghostly light on the water and tip the trees with silver. The voices of night were harmonious on the soft, chill air as birds flitted restlessly in the trees. Bullfrogs were once again full-throated. The mingled sounds sheered over the murmur of the river as it continued its run toward the Mississippi. Thus does nature erase the marks of tragedy.

Steve slowed his stride. "Right about here," he said.

The bewhiskered mountain men bent their eyes to the ground and began a minute study of the bank. Hump Mulvey whistled softly. Steve and Denver stepped over to him.

"Here's where he came out. Horse tracks met him."

Steve stared at the tracks and slowly straightened. A chill ran the length of his spine. The tracks of one horse showed a loose left front shoe. The breed had brought Steve's own sorrel to Black Mike. The whole crew had been in on the silver swindle!

STEVE pointed to the odd track. "My horse," he said bleakly. "The train's meat fetcher met Mike here."

The two mountain men hunkered over the marks, looking up at him. Steve was staring into the darkness. So his father's warning had not been without foundation. Steve pieced together what little he knew. The bullion donors had stayed away from the loading. Only his father had been there. The boxes had been securely fastened, and Steve had not inspected them when he took over at midnight. No one had touched them until the river was reached. The men Mike had sent aboard handled them in stowing, while the wagoneers loaded the boat's cargo slings. The whole crew must have been in on this treachery; otherwise someone would have noticed the lightness of the cases.

Steve fitted these things together aloud. Denver and Hump listened intently.

"A blind man could see it's an inside job," said Denver when Steve had finished. "A feller can't put a million in silver in any pocket he happens to have handy. Your dad might know something, but just let me get my hands on that steamer-jumping devil and he'll talk—"

"The trail's hot," said Steve bleakly. "But he's riding."

"Never saw the horse I couldn't run down," Denver boasted. "Hump, get out war bags. We'll put the button in a pair of moccasins so he can keep up. Then we'll light right out and catch them—"

Steve looked at Hump quickly and beat the little man to the punch. "Denver'll do it, too."

With a chuckle, Hump turned away. In a moment, he was back with a pair of moccasins.

Steve sat down and pulled off his soggy boots and drew on the moccasins. Testing them, he found they made him feel as if he were barefooted. Anxious to get on the trail, he said tersely, "Ready."

Denver and Hump shouldered their packs, placing the tump lines across their foreheads. The giant took the lead, his keen eyes following the plain trail left by the horses. His huge legs lifted into the shuffling run of the Plains Indian. It was the quick step of the trail and a space-eating stride. Steve fell in behind him. Hump brought up the rear.

As days passed into the maw of time, Steve came to know the hardiness of his companions. Many times he wanted to cry out that he could go no farther at this maddening and monotonous pace. Knowing only the saddle, he was unused to this method of travel. But he never faltered. He set his lips and kept on. His legs ached horribly at first, and the moccasins were little protection to tender feet. But he hardened to it, kindled by the determination of these two mountain men to make good their boast that they could outrun a horse.

Now with a month of travel behind them, during which time they knew the arid and waterless wastes of the Snake River Desert, the Trinity Range loomed on the horizon. Black Mike was traveling fast. Steve wondered if the man had waited to see if there were survivors from the

Slocum explosion. Could he have spotted Steve, but been scared off by the presence of the mountain men whom he knew to be friends of the steamer's skipper? Steve felt proud of the stamina of the horse Black Mike rode. But the animal must be flagging now. The tracks were increasingly fresh. No animal alive could stand this pace.

Steve's two companions had spoken little during the trip, so he had thought much. The more he dwelled on this mystery, the deeper and more far-reaching it became. He could only guess for answers. He kept his own counsel and doggedly followed in the footsteps of Denver O'Hara.

And now with night coming on, they topped a rise and Steve bumped solidly into Denver, who had stopped and was swearing luridly. Hump pulled alongside.

A cabin lay below them at the edge of a creek. Steve's sorrel stood head down near the water, cropping grass. The animal was badly spent. The breed's mount ranged alongside.

"Denver's done it!" Hump crowed.

"They're inside eating," said the giant slowly.

Steve thought for a moment. "We'll come up from three ways. I'll take the back."

Nodding, they split. Steve took a roundabout way and came up to the rear. In the excitement, he had forgotten to ask for his guns. But that was of no consequence now. He wanted these men alive. Stealthily, he crept toward the rear door.

The house was strangely silent as he made the edge of the wall. Darkness was growing thicker. Steve saw Hump Mulvey reach the east side of the cabin and creep toward the burlap-covered windows. Then Denver O'Hara was running toward the front door, skinning knife flashing in his hand. He unloosed a mighty bellow and plunged into the house. Steve lunged through the back door. Hump leaped the window sill.

The sight that greeted their eyes stopped them in their tracks. A man in strange black garb lay sprawled on the earthen floor. A pool of blood was at his side. His hair was jet black, with a short braid down the back. Chinese! No doubt one of the many Orientals who rushed to the silver strike from San Francisco to find that his kind were tolerated for labor only. This one had ranged wide and staked a claim of his own.

Black Mike and the breed were gone, their trail marked plainly in blood.

CHAPTER III

ACCUSED

STEVE felt the keen blade of frustration. There was no hope of overtaking the renegades now. This Oriental's fresh horses were under them. Denver O'Hara swore his bitter disappointment.

"This Chink ain't dead!" Hump exclaimed.

As Steve and Denver looked down at him, the Oriental groaned and tried to roll over.

They lifted him to the table and stretched him out. Steve's fingers explored for the wound and found a superficial one. The bullet had cleanly missed the bone.

The man's almond-shaped eyes popped open and rolled wildly. Muttering, he tried to rise. Denver's huge paw held him back.

"We're friends," Steve said kindly. "Don't be afraid. We seek the men who shot you."

The Chinese's work-calloused hand went up to finger his short queue and he groaned. "I not afraid of this living world; condemned as I am to the Land of the Dragon

in death. Sun Yat has lost his queue to white devils. He laughed and cut my hair as his friend stole my money and horses. It is written in the Book of Ages: 'He who loses face shall never see the Land of the Suns.' "

Steve nodded his sympathy. He knew what the long braid of hair meant to a Chinese. Like a son, it was his standard of social level.

"Let's get on," he said heavily. Denver and Hump grunted agreement.

The Chinese rolled painfully from the table, stood swaying on his bandy legs. "I would go with you," he said solemnly. "Everything I possess is gone. Perhaps I can help. 'The more bees, the quicker the honey jar is filled.' An old proverb of my country."

Hump snorted. "You couldn't keep up."

The Oriental drew himself up proudly. "Then I will fall by the roadside without complaint," he said simply.

Denver turned toward the door. Steve and Hump followed. Sun Yat quickly grabbed the few things left him and wrapped them in a handkerchief. Then he was following them into the night. Ten miles away, they bedded down in the open.

When dawn was but a promise in the eastern sky, Denver O'Hara led the way toward Piute Pass. Sun Yat brought up the rear now. A little black skull cap was on his head, his shortened queue trailing out behind. His black blouse hung loose on his small frame and was of costly Canton silk. His pajamalike trousers matched. As he ran, his movements were different from his companions. He covered the ground with the squat heel-and-toe style of the rickshа runner.

The summit of Piute Pass fell away behind them and the Truckees loomed ahead. Sun Mountain, beacon of the desert, could be seen through the haze. What had happened at the foot of that rock pinnacle, Steve could not guess. But with its nearness his forebodings grew stronger until he found himself weighed down by all sorts of fantastic theories.

He knew that other rich transports would draw renegade attention. Men who would resort to massacre would go to any lengths for gain. This murdering crew would be powerful, difficult to break. These thoughts served to tighten Steve's resolve.

THE third day found them rounding Spanish Peak and bringing the Washoe country into view. Eastward stretched Twenty-six-Mile and Forty-Mile Deserts. The Carson River ran like molten silver north and south. Sun Mountain and the arid Washoes made a jagged western horizon. And there at the foot of the tallest peak lay Virginia City. Dust whorls rolled along the floor of the land to mark activity.

Sun Yat had gained their respect and admiration during this last spurt. Weak from the loss of blood, embittered at losing everything he possessed, he had not whimpered. Nor had he lagged. He was one of them now as they swept down on the mining region. Steve went past Denver and took the lead. Going directly into town might spoil everything. Black Mike and the breed would be sure to hear of his coming and hide out.

Steve led the way up Pack Mule Canyon, past knots of men who favored them with cursory glances. As recognition came, they dropped their tools and came down the slopes,

shouting to one another, hemming the four in. Steve stopped, nonplused. Denver and Hump growled in their throats and their hands went to their knife hafts. Sun Yat stood impassive.

The begrimed miners advanced more warily the last hundred feet. Some held shovels and picks menacingly. There were two or three rifles in evidence, held at the hip.

"Turn into town, Alcorn!" one of the miners ordered harshly.

"Steve's fists balled. "What is this?" he demanded.

"Turn into town!"

Denver and Hump began clearing their knives, but Steve restrained them. He knew the temper of these miners when aroused. What had deviled them?

"Come on," Steve told his companions. "We'll find out what this is all about." He turned toward the city. The miners fanned out and followed, cutting off any chance of escape.

Puzzled, Steve led them onto Comstock Ledge, Virginia City's main street. Grimy crowds of men armed with picks and shovels surged about. Clapboard and canvas buildings lined the Ledge and showed the rigors of the weather in their stained

Steve sent the man blocking their escape sprawling as he and Boomer charged through the batwings.

and sun-blistered faces. Bullwhackers cursed and bullied their teams along the rutted street.

But now the town paused in its wild surge to El Dorado—and hell. Paused to stare at the four trail-weary men herded by the band from the hills. Someone bellowed from the boardwalk:

"Steve Alcorn! Take him to Fort Terry!"

Before Steve could realize what was happening, he was in the center of a mass of arms and angry faces; men who grabbed him roughly and dragged him toward the log fort at the mouth of Gold Canyon.

Steve fought and tried to break free, shouting questions, and getting no answers. This handling was beyond his understanding. The others were being trundled along, too.

Inside the fort, Steve was roughly thrust before a man who mounted an old gun carriage. It was Keg Silers, owner of the Skull Mine. The squat and powerful Silers had been a government donor, like John Alcorn. And now his broad, flat features were filled with rage. He raised his stumpy arms for silence and the crowd became still.

Steve shook off his captors. "What's this all about, anyway?" he demanded hotly.

Keg smiled unpleasantly. "*You* want to know. Alcorn, we want to know something, too. What have you and your father done with the silver?"

A feeling of dread weighed Steve down. What had he and his father done with the silver? The question confirmed a dread he hadn't even admitted to himself. Then something *had* happened to his father.

"I don't understand all this," he said swiftly. "My father has nothing to do with the silver. It was stolen from me, or him, somewhere near here."

Keg Silers looked out over the crowd. "Hear that, men? Very definite. He doesn't know a thing. Well, we got ways and means of sweating it out of him. Throw him in yonder guardhouse while I get the boys."

Rough hands seized Steve and his companions, and thrust them toward the blockhouse at the far end of the fort. They were thrown into the small room that served as a jail.

Then the miners stomped back toward the main street, shouting that the silver would soon be recovered, its whereabouts sweated from young Alcorn.

Steve listened, and violent anger shook him. Black Mike must have lingered long enough to see his meeting with the mountain men. Then he had raced here and told a damning story. But why, Steve wondered, did his father also stand accused? There was nothing to connect him with this. To be sure, the Alcorn Silver Nugget Mine had been petering out, but kindly faced John Alcorn, with his five little pieces of hammered silver hanging from his watch chain, was honest as the day was long. He was always the first to help a man when he was down, the first to aid a friend. Steve leaned weakly against the blockhouse wall.

CHAPTER IV

CONDEMNED

DENVER was stripped of his skinning knife and Piute scalp. Hump Mulvey, too, had been disarmed. Sun Yat sat on the edge of a filthy bunk, blinking stoically at the Americans.

"I dragged you into this," Steve said bitterly to Denver. "I'll square it the first chance I get."

"You won't square for me!" Denver said angrily. "I'm sticking. I wouldn't know my brother's killer from hell without you pointing him out."

"If you don't talk, kid, they'll try us," warned Hump.

Sun Yat nodded. "Short Whiskers is right. It is said, 'When birds of a feather flock together, one is sure to chirp.' We will all be tried for our silence."

"You've nothing to tell!" cried Steve. "I've nothing to tell."

"Which will go hard with us," said Denver grimly. "I'll bust out of this place—"

"For once Hump forgot to say, "Denver will do it, too."

Silent, the four occupied themselves, each in his own manner. Hump paced up and down. Denver tested every nook and cranny of the blockhouse, swearing at the strongly barred windows. Sun Yat squatted on the floor with the patience of Buddha. Steve remained against the wall, broodingly thoughtful. Mystery mocked him. His only clue was florid Black Mike Calenny. If the wagon boss could be found—

The rattling of the door drew Steve's attention. It swung in and two men stood there, guns leveled. Steve knew the heaviest of the duo. Drummer Krum, burly foreman to Keg Silers. A thick-necked giant with beady eyes. He matched Denver for bulk, but he had a paunch where O'Hara was ribbed with muscle.

"Just you, Alcorn," Drummer said.

Steve turned to his companions. "I'll do what I can," he promised. He quit the room and the door was locked behind him. Obeying the prod of Drummer's gun, he walked from the fort. It was the first time Steve had seen the wiry little man siding Drummer. Thin-lipped, hard-eyed, killer was written plainly on his face. Rich miners had use for such men in this country.

They herded Steve into Frenchy Lou's saloon. The few afternoon patrons turned and glared at him with hardly restrained fury.

USHERED into the little office at the rear, Steve stopped just over the threshold, taking in the five people about the circular table. Keg Silers sat beside Frenchy Lou. The woman was beautiful in a hard way, her sensuous features accentuated by rouge and powder. Her hair had been bleached to the lightness of honey. The icy sheen of her many jewels matched the glitter of her hazel eyes. Her trim hour-glass figure was accentuated by a tight bodice. Steve had heard his father speak of Frenchy Lou, but this was the first time he himself had met her.

Next to her sat Travers Gorman, owner of the Lucky Strike. He was a thin, pious man, an elder in the church, and a heavy donor to the pack train. His nose was a file, and his mouth a bloodless gash across his countenance. His thin, bony hands were pyramided on the table top. He was famous in this mining region for his unctuous way of misquoting the Scriptures.

Beside Travers was Tip McGrew, discoverer of Whipper Ledge. Small and nervous, his blunt fingers drummed the table top. His dark eyes were shifty. He looked at Steve, then fixed his attention elsewhere in the room.

Bull Urban, Bonanza Mine owner, sat at the far end of the table, a head taller than any of the others. His ruddy face was expressionless, pale eyes inscrutable.

Silers nodded to Drummer Krum

and the little killer to leave. Then he motioned Steve to the empty chair.

Travers Gorman cleared his throat. "My boy," he said with heavy solemnity, "it grieves me to have you here with this blight upon you and your father. Brother Silers has asked me to question you, hoping the sign for which I stand will open your heart to confession. Confession, you know, leads the way from the lion's den."

"Give me a chance first," Steve said evenly. "I'd like to ask some questions."

Silers looked pleased. "Go ahead, Alcorn." He glanced about the table with a smug expression of satisfaction.

"Where were you men when the silver was loaded into the wagons?" Steve asked quietly.

"Going about our business like your father wanted us to," answered Urban. "The city will vouch for that. He wanted as much secrecy as possible—even from us. He was in full charge."

"Then none of you saw the silver go into the boxes?"

"We loaded our personal crates and had our crews take them to your father," Keg Silers said. "Two weeks later he disappeared. Now we get the news the *Slocum* is blown—"

"How did the news reach you?" interrupted Steve harshly.

"That's where you slipped, Alcorn," Silers told him. "You didn't figure on Black Mike Calenny's fear of the water. You didn't know he'd jump instead of going down with the boat. He saw something, too, Alcorn. Bullion boxes floating!"

Steve's face blanched. Black Mike had brazenly twisted the story of the explosion to his own advantage. Steve saw that in these faces about him. Black Mike's story had thrown the burden of suspicion upon the missing John Alcorn. That meant Mike must have known where his father was.

Silers was still talking: "You might have gotten away with it, Alcorn, coming back with a wild tale that the silver was on the river bottom, and that you were the lone survivor. We might have trusted another shipment to you."

"One more question," interrupted Steve tightly, ignoring Keg's accusation. "Who was in charge of delivering the various amounts of silver to my father?"

"Drummer Krum for me," Silers answered. "Alcorn signed for it." He tossed out the signed slip. The rest fished in their pockets and produced similar papers. Steve studied them. Each one was signed by his father. Steve nodded grimly. This placed the theft between the time his father had turned the train loose and the time he himself had taken over.

Bull Urban shattered the heavy silence. "What's all this getting us? We know the *Slocum's* gone. Alcorn's gone, too. This kid knows more than he makes out. Wring it from him!"

Steve came to his feet. "You've got to hear my side of this," he said hotly and plunged into his story. He told it in detail. "So you see my friends have nothing to do with this," he concluded. "They all have a different purpose. Denver and Sun Yat and I want Black Mike. Our job is to find out what happened from the time my father signed the bills of receivership, and I took over. That's the key to the whole thing. Black Mike saw I survived, but wouldn't risk tackling me because I wasn't alone. He would have told you the silver was on the bottom had I died. He's changed

the story to fit my escaping death."

The group at the table was silent for a long moment. Frenchy Lou kept her emotions well screened. Keg Silers pawed his blunt chin. Urban remained bland and Travers Gorman studied his pyramided fingers. McGrew shifted nervously in his chair.

"My opinion ain't changed a bit," Urban said slowly. "You wanted Black Mike to keep him from spilling the story. You know the Silver Nugget was petering out, but you didn't know your father struck it rich again just after you left. Now both of you are out on the limb with your plans. You're lying, Alcorn."

"Yeah," muttered McGrew.

"Well, no one can say we didn't give him a chance," Silers declared.

"The way of the transgressor is blindfolded," misquoted Travers Gorman.

"My father striking a new lode and being gone is as much a surprise to me as to you," protested Steve.

"Your story might have held water if you'd caught Black Mike," Bull charged harshly.

There was no mercy in these men. They were driven to desperation by their losses. Steve would not blame them for grasping at every straw which might enlighten them. He shook his head, baffled. A million in silver had vanished from under their noses, and Black Mike had thrown the whole thing full upon his shoulders. Steve let out a gusty breath. His father had never been greedy, but why had he disappeared after striking it rich again? Was it because he had engineered this coup in conjunction with Black Mike? Grudgingly, Steve had to admit there was little he could say in defense of his father.

Silers got up from the table and walked to the door. "Drummer!" he called. "You'll have to sweat this hombre."

Steve licked his lips. Imprisoned, he could no nothing. He had to get free. When Drummer opened the door, Steve took a long chance and lunged straight at him.

CHAPTER V

ESCAPE

STEVE'S shoulder caught Drummer just above the belt. With a grunt of surprise, the giant reeled against the wall, but he was solid enough to throw Steve off balance. With a lurid curse, the wiry killer siding Drummer brought his pistol barrel down on Steve's head.

Steve returned to consciousness with thin blades of pain shooting down his neck. It was night, and darkness hid the surroundings. He groped with his hands and found the ground covered with cold, wet straw. When he moved a chain rattled. He was in a barn, shackled to a stall side by a blacksmith's hobble chain.

He sank back, bitterly cursing himself for attempting escape. By so doing, he had left no doubt of his guilt.

The barn door swung open and Drummer Krum entered with a lantern. The yellow light played over his burly frame, distorting his body to gigantic size. Other men were with him, but they remained in shadow. Townsmen and donors who had come to hear a confession, Steve decided bitterly.

Drummer set the lantern down where its light would fill the stall. He carried a short whip in his right hand.

"You ready to tell about your father?" he demanded brusquely.

"There's nothing to tell," Steve answered through compressed lips.

Drummer grunted and swung his

whip. His heavy, florid features were flushed, and brutal enjoyment burned in his eyes.

The leather ran around Steve's back, the feel of it hot as if a running iron had been placed against naked skin. He set his jaw to keep from crying out.

The leathern tongue licked over his shoulders and about his waist, a flame that set his brain afire. Drummer became a swaying gargoyle above him, a giant caught in the frenzy of his own brutality.

With a scream of rage, Steve surged to his feet and lashed out at that evil face haloed by lantern light. His knuckles bit into Drummer's sweating face and pushed it back. Forgetting his shackles, Steve followed and tripped headlong. Before he could rise, the giant's heavy boots were battering at his sides, sapping his little remaining strength. Steve stiffened on the straw, a groan of agony escaping his blood-flecked lips.

"Drummer, stop!" someone cried. "He'll talk when he's able."

That voice seemed to have the power to halt Krum's frenzy. The giant swore heavily and picked up the lantern.

"We'll leave him to think it over," he panted and stalked out. The barn door closed behind him.

Steve remained face down where he had fallen, muscles set against the waves of pain coursing his body. In this moment, his bitterness and hatred and resolve flowed over. If he ever got his hands on the men responsible for this torture— Then nausea gripped him and he lay still as death.

DAWN brought heat and the incessant devilment of flies. Insects bit cruelly into his raw back, and as the day wore on, Steve fought burning thirst. In a mad moment, he tried to pull the shackle from its staple, but the exertion left him panting with fresh pain.

After an eternity, the heat lessened and the stickiness of the flies told of coming night. Shadows crept across the floor. The cool down draft from the mountains followed. Steve stared at the blank wall, too weary and exhausted to think clearly.

He did not hear his name until it was whispered the second time. "Steve Alcorn!"

"Water," he croaked hoarsely.

The window gloom deepened as someone ducked through. It was Frenchy Lou, her billowing skirts gathered in her hand. She knelt beside Steve.

"Krum's blind drunk," she whispered. "I stole his key to the iron."

She reached down and unsnapped the shackle. Steve rubbed the swollen ankle gingerly. "Why do you do this for me?" he managed huskily.

"Never question a woman, kid," she answered, and Steve caught the bitterness in her voice. "There's a horse outside. Ride—and don't come back. Your father's gone, and you'll hang, once the town's convinced you won't talk."

"How do you know that?" demanded Steve, fighting giddiness in his brain.

"Just take it from me," she said sharply. "I'm paying back a favor. I'll never be able to help you again."

With her aid, Steve gained his feet. Waves of blackness threatened to rob him of what little strength he had left. Frenchy Lou held tightly to him, helping him to the horse. It took all her strength to get him into the saddle.

Steve looked down at her. "I'm in your debt," he said quietly. "I

hope I don't find you at the end of the trail."

Frenchy Lou's greenish hazel eyes were impassive. "You won't run; I should have known that. But I've squared my debt. Now I wash my hands of you."

He wanted to ask her what she meant, but she slapped the horse's rump and started it off toward the drab foothills of the Washoes. Steve had all he could do to stick on the unguided animal.

The singing air served to clear his brain, but the vigor of the horse tore at his pitifully low strength. He could only hope to stay in the saddle as long as his grip held out.

As he rode, one thought burned brightly within him. Frenchy Lou knew something. To whom did she owe a debt? She said his father was gone. Where? The answers must come from her. When strength permitted, Steve meant to return and ask her those questions, and get Denver and Hump and Sun Yat out of the blockhouse.

As he rode higher and higher into the hills, the night chill brought on fever. One moment he shook until his teeth rattled, the next he was burning. Grimly, he held to the saddlehorn. He wondered where this animal was taking him. All horses returned to their home corrals. But he could not risk the reins for fear of losing his seat in the leather.

Abruptly the horse turned up a narrow canyon. Its quick move upset Steve and he rolled off. The ground came up hard and unyielding. He lost consciousness, his last sensation that of icy coldness.

HIS senses returned to a cool feeling on his lips. He swallowed and realized drops of water were falling on them. Opening his eyes a slit, he saw that he was in a cabin. Someone had placed him on a bed. A girl bent over him, squeezing water from a cloth. She was unconscious of Steve's scrutiny.

Coppery curls framed her lovely face. But the real beauty of her was marred by shadows of worry in her blue eyes. Her rich lips did not have their natural soft curve. There was a tightness to them that spoke of tension and fear. Her shoulders were supple and graceful. Abruptly, she caught the flicker of his lids, and, with a tiny intake of breath, straightened.

"You're better," she said with relief.

Steve's eyes opened full, and he took in her full figure. She was tall for a girl, lithe and slender in her plaid blouse and blue denims.

"I'd run pretty dry," he murmured thickly.

"You've run from something else, too," she said shrewdly, indicating the whip welts.

"How did I get here?" Steve asked, evading the implication of her remark.

The question brought out her worry in full force. "My father's horse," she said slowly. "I searched down canyon to see if he had been pitched off, and found you. I'm afraid something's happened to dad."

"Why?" asked Steve.

"He was angry when he left for town, angry at some men who had offered a measly sum for the mine." She stopped. "I don't know why I should be telling you this."

"Maybe I can help," said Steve. "Did he mention any names?"

"No."

Steve's lids came down over his eyes. Had Frenchy Lou taken a horse she knew the owner could no longer use? To comfort the girl, Steve explained how he had gotten

the animal and why it had thrown him. He finished with, "If Frenchy took the first horse she could lay hands on, you haven't a worry. Perhaps your father is still in town and doesn't know the animal's gone."

"I hope that's true. From your story you sound like—"

"Steve Alcorn," he finished for her.

A trace of fear crept into the girl's eyes. "Wanted by everyone in Virginia City—you and your father. I understand those welts now; understand—"

"Everything but the truth," interrupted Steve bitterly. "But why should you be any different from the rest? You're on one side of the fence. Whatever, wherever your father is, you can hold up your head and say he's honest. Facing the facts, I can't say that about mine. Tied by blood to him, I'm dishonest to all people."

His hopelessness seemed to sweep away her fear and replaced it with skepticism. "Why should I believe you?"

"I'm not asking it," he answered wearily. "When a man's honest he doesn't have to go around shouting it."

She stared at him strangely. Apparently his sincerity convinced her. "I've nothing to lose by believing," she said slowly.

Steve nodded, grateful for her understanding. He knew that in this moment she was drawn to him by a common bond, their fear for their fathers.

In a voice weary with exhaustion, but fraught with resolve, he said: "The silver was intrusted to me and I've got to get it back. You can't hide a million in bullion in a dresser drawer or under the floor of a shack. It takes men to handle that much. Where there are men, there are bound to be mistakes. I'll find those mistakes!"

His determination stirred her. A flush of color rose to her cheeks. Impulsively her hand went out to touch his. "I hope you succeed," she murmured.

Steve's fingers covered hers. "I've got to." He held her eyes.

For long moments, they studied each other. The girl was the first to look away.

"You're welcome here at Matt Barton's Two Bit Mine," she said. "Welcome to stay until you're well. Then—"

"I'm in your debt," he assured her, "and won't be far off at any time, Miss Barton."

"Deborah Barton," she said with a smile.

BEFORE Steve could speak again, the door in the next room creaked back on its hinges.

Deborah turned from the bedside. "That must be dad," she said. "He'll want to talk to you. He's ready to add silver to the next load going out."

Steve settled back comfortably and closed his eyes as she left the room. His eyes opened quickly as Deborah's rising voice beat into the room, her tone fraught with anger and fear. "What do you want here?"

A harsh voice answered: "Where's the stake claim paper for the Two Bit? Your father's selling out."

"He told me he wasn't."

"He changed his mind."

"I don't believe it. I've never seen you before. I won't give it to you."

A triumphant chuckle crept into the man's voice. "So it's in the house. Just back against the wall, sister, while I look around."

"Get out! Get out of this cabin!"

Steve came to his elbows as Deborah ran across the floor. He sat bolt upright when the man laughed and the ugly sound was followed by the smack of flesh on flesh. The girl cried out in pain, and Steve heard her fall on the floor.

Steve leaped from the bed, swaying unsteadily on his feet. He drew his hand across his brow to brush the pain away. He saw Deborah's small-caliber gun on the wall peg and whipped it from its holster. Weaving, he stepped through the door.

The living-room lamp gave but feeble light. The man was at the room's far end. Deborah lay where she had fallen. Steve steadied himself.

"Reach!" he warned harshly.

With a grunt of surprise, the man spun, his hands coming up gun-filled. Steve let the hammer of his weapon drop. The concussion made the lamp gutter.

Lead chunked into the door jam at Steve's shoulder. Through the curling smoke he saw the man plunge face down to the floor.

Still clutching his weapon, Steve helped Deborah to her feet. Dazedly, she brushed a shaky hand across her brow. Her eyes strayed to the fallen form and she shuddered.

Steve put her from him and bent over the dead man, turning him face up. The set countenance made him gasp. Black Mike Calenny! Then Steve's shoulders slumped. Whatever he had hoped to find out from this man now was sealed by death.

CHAPTER VI

BOOMER MAN

AS Steve straightened up from his study of the dead man, Deborah said fearfully: "I know something has happened to father now. This man was lying."

"I'm going to find out," Steve said consolingly. "You stay here. Hide the claim papers and take your gun. Don't be afraid to use it. I'll bring some word. But don't you leave here!"

"But you?" She sounded worried. "You're not strong enough."

"I'll be all right," he said tightly.

He stooped down and gathered the body of Black Mike into his arms. It cost him all his strength to get it outside and into its saddle.

Tying it in the leather, Steve slapped the mount's rump. Here was the first warning to the renegades. An ironic warning. For Steve wished the man were alive. Black Mike, alive, could have been made to tell much. He could have revealed the whereabouts of John Alcorn—dead or alive.

Waving to Deborah, who stood in the doorway, Steve turned down the canyon. Frenchy Lou was his only hope now. He drew his tattered shirt more tightly about him. His ribs pained, but he steeled himself against its discomfort. He avoided the trail leading down. Every man was dangerous to him.

With the lights of Virginia City directly below him, Steve went down a narrow canyon. The clamor of the place beat up, for this boom camp was a twenty-four-hour town. Liquor and money were plentiful, with schemers and card sharps directing their flow.

Warily, Steve approached the rear of Frenchy Lou's place. The street out front teemed with men and wagons. His attention was fixed there when a burly figure stepped from the shadows.

"Where you been?" inquired Denver O'Hara. "We heard you were brought here."

Back of him, Hump and Sun Yat

The renegades set fire to the wagon train after ruthlessly massacring the drivers.

stepped from the gloom. "Denver pulled the cork out of that jug," Hump said proudly. The Oriental was silent, his hands tucked in the sleeves of his blouse.

Relieved that they had escaped, Steve drew them into deep shadow. He recounted all that had happened; then, apologetically: "I robbed you boys of your fun in downing Black Mike. From here on out it's my chore. Thanks for your help."

Silence ran for a moment. Sun Yat broke it. "To have a friend is to need one. My faith writes, 'He who is served in turn serves.'"

Before Steve could say anything, Denver cleared his throat. "That goes double for me. You getting the jasper who blew up the boat is like skimming milk. I want some of the cream. The jiggers who put the weasel up to killing my brother."

"Count me in on the frolic," Hump said solemnly.

Faced with such loyalty, Steve knew it would be useless to refuse the aid of these men, so he only said: "You know what you're getting into?"

"We'll look when the door is open," answered the Oriental sagely.

"And make some fur fly," put in Denver. Hump nodded.

Steve gave in. "I came to talk with Frenchy Lou," he explained. "Wait here."

He slipped past them toward the rear of the saloon. He went to the window of the office, careful of its light shaft. Peering in, he found it empty. The frame gave under his pressure. With a jerk that brought sweat to his forehead, he hoisted himself up and in.

Quickly, he closed the window and stepped to the door of Frenchy's private stairway leading to the second floor. He let himself into the gloom and began his wait.

It wasn't long. Frenchy came into her office, laughing gayly at someone, and closed the door behind her. Steve stepped into the room, and as she stood transfixed, placed a chair against the door.

"You shouldn't have come here," she gasped.

He faced her sternly. "You helped me for a reason. I want to know why. Where are my father and Matt Barton?"

The glitter in the woman's eyes became brighter. "I told you to go," she said. "I can't help you further."

Steve grabbed her wrists in a vise-like grip. "Answer me!"

Her lips twisted in pain. "You're hurting me."

Steve released her. "I'm sorry."

"Get out!"

Stubbornly, Steve shook his head. "You can trade on my being a gentleman, but you'll talk before I leave this room!"

"Never!" she said harshly. "I'm square with the board. Now get out! Somebody will come to that door soon, and you'll go out on a slab."

Steve shook his head grimly. "Talk, Miss Lou."

For an answer, she tried to lunge past him. Steve reached out to grab her, but her outflung arm caught him in the ribs and made him reel with pain.

Frenchy's red-slippered toe kicked the chair from the door and she opened it, screaming, "Spike! Grip! Come here!"

Her hysteria brought the patrons running. They crowded to the doorway and somebody shouted: "Steve Alcorn! Get him alive!"

Holding his aching side, Steve lunged up the private stairway with the patrons in pursuit. The way led to a dimly lit hall. At the far end, the saloon stairway led down. Steve took the steps four at a time, plunging into the barroom.

The few laggards charged in front of the swinging doors to bar his escape. A short thick man moved toward Steve. Excitement shone in his dark eyes. His lips were parted in a grin, his hamlike fists were balled.

"Just call me Boomer," he said genially. "Let's get out the front way."

Nonplused, Steve could only grunt with surprise. The shabbily dressed Boomer hunched his shoulders and drew his head down to lead the way.

PROTECTING his ribs with one hand, and punching with the other, Steve lunged at the shouting men before him. His knuckles caromed off a man's jaw and sent him sprawling against his companions. The crowd was coming up fast behind.

The strange Boomer would not be stopped. With pile-driving force, he hit the scattered few and bowled them over like nine pins. His fists and body were busy as he opened a hole a horse could get through. Steve followed him into the night. The

crowd fought through the door and followed, screaming for their hides.

Panting with pain and exertion, Steve took the lead. "This way!" he yelled and plunged between buildings. The three waiting men joined him.

"We've got to keep going!" he shouted as Denver bristled to the battle. He continued on, his three friends siding him, but casting suspicious glances at this stranger.

They lost the crowd in the darkness of the hills. Steve sank wearily down. Hump Mulvey braced Boomer. "Who are you?" he asked narrowly.

"Leave him be, Hump," Steve said quickly. "Whoever or whatever will have to wait. He got me out of the saloon; that's all that matters now."

"No, it ain't," said Hump hotly. "Speak up, stranger."

Steve studied the mining man in the star glow. Humor lurked at his lip corners. He was a man who could smile as he went to his death—seeing something ironic in the dying. Now he spoke in a voice totally hiding the power latent within him:

"I'm just plain Boomer. If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for you. I've been around here for months getting callouses on my hands. I haven't hit pay dirt yet. I said to myself, 'Steve Alcorn's on the loose.' If I meet up with that jasper I'm going to join his band. Well, boys, I've joined. Count me in; and when is the first split?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree," said Hump, taken aback. "We're honest."

"So honest," countered Boomer, "nobody in Nevada believes it."

Steve took over. "You don't know what you're getting into, boomer man."

"I've an idea," Boomer said. "It'll pay off."

"What makes you think so?"

Boomer grinned. "The only way to get honey is near the bees."

"Honey's habit is to turn to granulation," Sun Yat remarked stoically.

"I'll take a little of that," murmured Boomer.

Steve shrugged. The man was misguided by town talk. "You're welcome to come along, Boomer," Steve said, "but you'll find it different than you think."

"Just so it's different," stated Boomer blandly.

Steve let the miner's insistence go at that, for bitter thoughts of failure were pressing down upon him. He had failed to make Frenchy Lou talk. He could never get another chance.

His salvation lay in keeping his freedom. The government would have men in the field soon. In their custody meant court-martial—and a firing squad.

SLOWLY, Steve got to his feet. "We've got to follow every lead," he said. "Hump, you find out where the horse took Black Mike. A horse always returns to its home corrals. Denver, you and Boomer scout the hills and locate the building of the next ore train, the one Deborah Barton told me about. Sun Yat, drift into Chinatown and talk with your countrymen, then go by the Two Bit and tell Miss Barton we've no news yet of her father. We'll meet tomorrow at my father's house. It's the stone place just west of the Ophir Cut. I'm going to the Silver Nugget."

"Come on, boomer man," Denver said gruffly. "I'll sweat a little cockiness out of you." Hump turned into the darkness. Sun Yat slipped away.

Steve stood for a moment, watching his friends fan out. He was

thankful for their services, for he knew no man could make it alone against the odds these renegades had piled up.

Taking off his tattered shirt, he bound it tightly about his ribs. It helped movement and breathing. He swung into the hills toward the Silver Nugget, whose shaft paralleled that of Keg Silers' Skull Mine.

As he topped the canyon rim, the window of the Nugget's pay shack was a yellow eye in the darkness, the tunnel mouth alight with smoking torches. Ore cars trundled in and out on the narrow-gauge track. Surprisingly, the mine was producing full blast!

Cautiously, Steve made his way up the embankment formed of the mine tailings. Whoever worked this shaft was doing so without the owner's permission since John Alcorn was gone and Steve himself a fugitive.

The sound of Steve's approach was drowned by the noises of the ore cars. He gained the side of the pay shack, staying in the deep gloom and studying the workers piloting the cars in and out. He recognized most of the men. The same Alcorn crew was working the mine!

Worming his way along the wall, Steve peered in the window. His eyes widened. Old Washoe Sims sat on the high stool poring over the books!

Mystified, Steve stepped to the door and pushed in. Washoe spun on his stool, his bearded leathery face wrinkling in amazement. He jumped down and grabbed Steve's hand.

"Well, blast me for drilling!" he cried excitedly. "I thought they'd caught you. Seen that ore-headed father of yours?"

"No," answered Steve quickly. "Who's operating, Washoe?"

"The Syndicate," answered the oldster with an oath. "Keg Silers, Tip McGraw, Bull Urban and Travers Gorman. They got a government order to operate until they recover all the bullion lost in the shipment. The government's convinced your pappy stole the other. This is legal and aboveboard. I'm keeping track though, so if it turns out John didn't steal the load, we'll get all this back."

"I should say no!" came a guttural voice from the doorway.

CHAPTER VII

BALKED BY MASSACRE

STEVE and Washoe whirled to face the hulking form of Drummer Krum. A gun was in the big man's hairy fist.

"I should say you get nothing," he repeated. "I saw you sneak in. The law will be interested to know you were here at the pay shack, Alcorn."

He advanced slowly. Steve expelled a long breath. Being caught here was further evidence to be turned against him. His shoulders slumped.

Then Washoe swung his stool. The legs caught Drummer in the gun hand, knocking the weapon to the floor. Before the grunt of surprise left his thick lips, Washoe had the gun leveled at him.

"You, too?" swore Krum harshly. "You'll die like him if you don't give back that gun."

"You'll be the only one hurt if you move," snapped Sims. "I ain't liked you since you took over for Silers and the boys. Get gay and I'll put a slug 'tween your agate eyes."

Steve shook his head. "This cooks you, Washoe. You shouldn't have got tangled up in this business."

"Don't worry about me," grinned

the oldster. "I'm spoiling for a good fight, and I'll get it with you—sooner or later. The ore outgo is being checked by a government man, so I don't mind leaving here. I just wish this gent would get nervous."

"Come on," ordered Steve. "We'll settle with him when the chore is done. He gave me something to remember."

With Steve leading the way, Washoe backed to the door and slammed it behind him. Then he was racing into the darkness at Steve's side, tucking the gun in the waist band of his blue denims.

Steve was silent as he led the way toward his father's house. He had been sure he would find something at the Silver Nugget. But instead he had run into legitimate business.

The first gray streaks of dawn were stabbing into the sky when Steve and Washoe came to the Alcorn stone house. It was the most pretentious dwelling in all the Washoe country, built as a monument to the Silver Nugget Mine. As Steve pushed through the rear door, he found himself wondering if Deborah would like living there.

Aimless, he wandered into the living room. He stood in the tomblike quiet, scanning the place. Every article conjured memories of his father. John Alcorn's pipe lay on the mahogany table top, the dottle spilled out upon it. Gun belts and holstered guns hung over the massive fireplace. They were the weapons John Alcorn had worn when he punched cattle in Montana. Absently, Steve took them from their pegs. He needed guns. His own had been taken from Denver when they first entered Virginia City.

He rummaged in the table drawer and took out some shells. Laying them on the table, he sat down wearily. He looked at Washoe, who had taken the chair across from him.

"You sleep," said Washoe. "I've had enough to last me a week."

Steve nodded and yawned. With Washoe on guard, he could safely snatch some needed rest. His head dropped forward on his chest. He awakened to the gentle shaking of his shoulder. Night had come on. The room was black.

"Your boys should be along," Washoe said.

Steve rose and stretched. The unbroken sleep had done wonders. New strength charged his muscles. His appetite had a wolfish edge. Before he could speak of it, Washoe tapped the table.

"Help yourself," he invited.

Steve wolfed the cold meat and bread. He was on edge and eager when Sun Yat slipped into the house. The Oriental halted suspiciously at Washoe's silhouette, but accepted Steve's terse explanation.

"I learn only that a shipment of silver leaves tonight," he said gravely. "The bullion comes from many mines and from those of the men who lost in the first shipment. They will try again—with Bull Urban in charge. Missy Barton still keeps faith."

Steve nodded. "Good work! Now if Denver and Boomer find out which way the train goes—" He let the silence run.

Hump materialized in the gloom so quietly he startled the three. When Washoe's identity was given him, he said: "It was a livery-stable horse. Black Mike is down at Cornwacker's coffin parlor. Nobody's been near to claim him. Barton ain't been seen. That totals up to nothing." He spat with disgust.

"You found out how smart they can be," Steve praised him. But this information was more depressing

than enlightening. If the other two lacked concrete information, he was right back where he started from.

TIME dragged on. The only sound in the room was the breathing of the men. Steve brooded, his impatience rising. If these men would only come into the open and give him something upon which to train his guns. He found himself wondering how many more mine owners had disappeared or were killed by these wraithlike renegades who sought control of this rich country.

His head came up as Denver and Boomer came in. Explaining Washoe's identity to them, he waited for their report.

"We located the train," Denver said quickly. "Right now the silver's moving around the hill just below the Silver Nugget. It left the Skull ten minutes ago. The way they're heading, they'll go behind Nugget Knob, circle in behind Skull and hit out across Forty-Mile Desert, heading for Kansas and the railhead."

"We were close when they loaded," explained Boomer. "Sandy Bowers, John Mackay, Gould and Curry, and all the rest, were there. The silver's in the boxes now."

Steve pondered. "They're going the same way around the mountain as my train," he said finally. "I picked it up at midnight just behind the cut where the Silver Nugget and Skull burrow down. Let's go!"

Quickly, he buckled on his brace of guns, spilled the shells into his hand and loaded the right-hand weapon. Jamming cartridges in his pocket, he led the way from the house.

Hump grabbed a rifle from its wall pegs. Sun Yat took a gleaming skinning knife from the wall rack. Washoe had Drummer Krum's pistol. Denver and Boomer had stolen guns while they were out. Thus armed, Steve's small crew trailed him as he led the way down canyon.

At the space-eating lope taught by Denver and Hump, Steve circled the hill housing the Silver Nugget and the Skull. An anæmic moon threw feeble light upon the serrated hills. The way led up onto a ridge overlooking the delta of the pass down which the train would come.

The little group had only a short wait. The harsh cursings of the bullwhackers floated up to them, the rumble of wagon wheels a heavier note beneath their voices. They had already passed in behind the Silver Nugget and the Skull and were now stretching out for the run across the desert floor. There were no out guards.

"Going like the devil was after them," grunted Denver.

"They had a good start the last time," said Boomer and looked sharply at Steve.

"You're wasting your time," Steve said evenly. Boomer's answer was a grin.

Steve looked back, and breath caught in his throat as a wedge of riders swarmed from a canyon. Purple flashes blossomed. The dull sounds of shots floated up. The train sawed in disorder, wagons darting off at tangents. They looked like match boxes drawn by teams of ants.

Then, quickly as it had happened, it was over. The wagons were turned into a circle, the horses unhitched. A crimson flame rose.

Teeth clenched, Steve lunged down the slope. He ran as he had never run before. His grim-lipped companions were hard put to match his speed.

Inside, Steve felt sick and helpless. The train drivers had been ruthlessly massacred. The fire glow

revealed the renegades rounding up the unhitched horses and heading for the hills.

WITH breath laboring, Steve stopped at the fire's edge. The others came up to side him, blowing hard.

"They're getting braver—and impatient," Steve said. "We aren't five miles out of the city."

"Nobody burns silver," Denver swore luridly. "That means the stuff ain't in the wagons."

"But we saw it loaded," said Boomer emphatically.

"A mask for mistakes is well done in charcoal," Sun Yat remarked.

Steve nodded at the Oriental's cryptic comment. "Denver, could you and Boomer say whether they were the same wagons if you saw them?"

"I'd know them in hell!" Denver declared.

"Me, too," said Boomer.

Throwing up his arm to ward off the heat, Steve braved the flames. The others followed. With frenzied haste, they grabbed a wagon tongue and tugged it free of the fire. Shoveling dirt with their hands, they reduced it to a smoldering hulk.

Steve and the others stood back, wiping the perspiration from their smoke-blackened faces while Denver and Boomer inspected the wagon closely.

Steve stared at the carnage, mute testimony to the cruelty of the renegades. Ten bodies lay sprawled on the desert floor, their lips sealed by death.

"They've been treated with pitch or something to make them burn fast, Denver said grimly.

"Are they the same ones?" insisted Steve.

"Could be," said Boomer. "Same make and all. The fire's done too much to tell more.

Steve looked disappointed. Here again was failure. The cunning of these outlaws balked him at every turn. They were thorough men. Clever beyond imagination. For somewhere between the time Denver and Boomer had seen them load the silver before its owner's eyes, it was spirited into thin air. Something had gone wrong somewhere, for the whole crew had to die.

Steve's bitter thoughts were interrupted by Hump Mulvey. "Horses coming," the little man said. "Fire's been seen."

The desert floor was beginning to rumble beneath their feet. With a wave, Steve turned and streaked toward the hills into which the raiders had vanished.

Like wraiths, the five fugitives angled away from the fire. They ran closely bunched, the stocky Boomer making the heaviest going. Steve called a halt well within the sheltering banks of the arid canyon.

Sitting down to rest, Steve backtracked on the angles of this mystery. The will-o'-the-wisps he had followed had all ended in failure. The only tangible thing left was the trail of the murderous cavalcade. Numbering so many, they were bound to leave a plain sign.

"There were at least twenty riders," Steve mused. "Their trail goes somewhere and I'm finding out!"

"We'll track them lizards if they crawl across rock!" swore Hump.

"*I'll* track them," Steve corrected. "One man might find something where five would be discovered. I want you all to go to the Two Bit Mine. Deborah Barton will put you up. First sign I find, I'll let you know."

In the silence, Steve drew his left

gun. He wanted both pieces loaded. He tried to jam a shell into the chamber as Denver said: "I don't want to miss the showdown."

Finding an obstruction in the cylinder of the weapon, Steve worked the jack and answered: "When that comes, we'll all be there. I promise." Then an exclamation escaped his lips. The others leaned close.

Steve's palm held a piece of hammered silver. Quickly, he jacked at the other cylinders. Similar pieces of hammered silver fell into the palm from each one. Five of them! They gleamed dully in the moonglow.

"What do you make of that?" demanded Denver.

"They're the silver pieces of my father's watch chain!" Steve exclaimed.

Each one of them took a piece and examined it. Steve's eyes narrowed as he turned his over in his hand. He could see nothing in this pale light.

"The mightiest message can be written on the head of a pin, but defies ciphering to all but the sharpest eyes," Sun Yat murmured.

"It's a message, all right," Denver agreed. "But I make nothing of it."

"It means one thing to me," said Steve excitedly. "My father isn't the leader of this silver-stealing bunch. He was surprised, and the only thing he could think of was to leave these."

They were all silent for long moments, each trying to conjure the meaning of this find. But it eluded their wildest flights of imagination.

Finally, Steve said: "I'll carry them in my pocket and maybe it will come to me. The rest of you get started for the Two Bit."

They handed back their pieces of silver and rose. Solemnly, they shook hands with Steve and, with Washoe leading the way, headed across the hills.

Steve watched them go as he loaded the gun which had held the strange message. He was eager to take the trail. To comb every ridge and canyon of this arid country for the renegades if he must. He knew he must exercise extreme caution. The Alcorns were gun bait now for every man who carried firearms.

But he was immeasurably lifted by the knowledge that it was not his father he sought as ringleader of these thieving outlaws. And as he moved into the darkness to pick up the trail, five little pieces of silver jingled in his pocket. Five little pieces of silver that held some mysterious meaning.

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH REVEALS A CLUE

STEVE retraced his steps to the desert's edge. From behind a huge rock, he looked out to where the burning wagons set up their glow. A milling cavalcade of townspeople were forming into a group.

Steve swore softly. They had picked up the renegade trail, and would pass within a few feet of his covert. He had no choice but to remain where he was.

As the leaders drew abreast, he could hear them talking.

"We'll stretch them Alcorns for this," swore one.

"Wonder what's happened to that Lieutenant Carter Rowel the government sent out to hunt them down? asked another. "Ain't see hide nor hair of him since he came."

"Carter Rowel," scoffed someone. "Don't sound like no man-hunting name to me."

"They left a plain trail this time," another said harshly.

As a body, they turned into the canyon taken by the renegades. For long moments, they milled about, then rode on.

That conversation confirmed Steve's bitter thoughts. The miners would kill him on sight now. And the government was at work. That meant double danger.

Cautiously Steve moved up the trail taken by the townsmen and renegades. As dawn began to take over the sky, he sought the ridge above him where he could look down upon the hoof-churned trail. Working his way up a steep bank, he came to a razorlike edge. The canyon used by the wagon train and renegades lay below him. The broad path was as plain as freshly raked ground. He traced its course from the desert floor, in and out of canyon curves and around the base of the hill which held the Silver Nugget and Skull tunnels. The townsmen posse, riding slowly, was just topping the pass into the city.

Steve stared in amazement. The renegade trail led back into the pass and into town. It was incredible that they could have been so bold. But no trace of them led away from the main trail after they had rejoined it. They had waited until the townsmen passed, then circled the hill into town. Their identities, like the silver, had vanished into thin air.

Suddenly the gleam of sun striking metal caught his eye. Steve froze inside, but gave no sign of his start by undue action. A man was on the ridge above him; the spark had come from his rifle barrel. As nonchalantly as he could, Steve continued on his way until a jutting talus of land hid him from the watcher's view.

Then he was slipping into an arid wash, taking the steep ascent. Cautiously, he worked his way into position where he could look down.

The man was prone on his stomach, his rifle thrust before him. The thin smoke of a cigarette curled about his hat brim. He was definitely a lookout, but for what?

STEVE dropped over the ledge and began a careful stalk. The bank was steep, foot holds precarious. The lookout must have heard something, for he turned, a guttural curse breaking from his lips. His rifle came up. Desperately, Steve lunged and caught him by the foot. With a cry, the guard lost his balance and fell heavily against Steve. Clutching each other, they rolled to the bottom of the canyon.

Prepared for a grim and silent battle, Steve kicked free from the man's legs and scrambled to his feet. His balled fists slowly unclenched.

The man lay inert. Blood pumped from a gash in his head where it had struck a rock. Killer was written plainly on his sharp features. Steve looked down at him bleakly. Again, lips that could have told much were silenced by death.

Turning away from the grisly sight, Steve made the top of the ridge. Carefully, he scanned his back trail. There was nothing in that direction to guard. The land was a tortuous maze of canyons and crevices defying mass penetration. The guard must have been set to watch something directly below him. Steve looked into the pass, failing to discover anything out of the ordinary.

He swung back, peering into the pass again. Then his flesh crawled. A man was standing in the center of the pass, looking first one way, then the other!

Steve was stunned. A second before no living thing had been there.

Yet now the man in the trail looked up, waving a signal that asked plainly if all was clear. Steve answered, hardly breathing.

Then he gasped as four men stepped from a clump of brush, appearing as if by magic out of the side of the hill. They joined the lone man, and the five walked at a leisurely pace toward town.

Steve's hands shook with excitement. Answers to the questions he had asked himself so often ran through his mind. Yet, he dared not think they were true. The long trail he had figured on had suddenly taken a definite turn.

Controlling his impatience, Steve remained where he was. His pulse hammered and eagerness tore at him to explore that screened tunnel. To while away the hours, he drew forth his father's five little pieces of silver. Suddenly he noticed that a letter was hastily scratched into each one.

He arranged the silver pieces on his knee. They spelled L U K S L.

Steve had to work quickly —to be discovered now would mean certain death!

It mean nothing to him. Shaking his head in disgust, he settled back to await darkness with his puzzle and the dead guard for companion.

THE day droned into eternity. Steve kept a sharp watch on the screened tunnel burrowing into Nugget Knob, of which the Silver Nugget Skull had openings on the other side. Three times he gave all-clear signals to groups of men. Like the rest, they headed upgrade into town.

His eagerness heightened as the cool down draft swept from the higher scarps. With typical mountain suddenness the sun was gone and stars cropped out.

Stiffly, Steve rose. Hiding the body of the gun guard, he skirted the hill and came into the pass. Carefully, he made his way to the clump of brush that had disgorged the men. Aided by the soft light of the stars, he felt his way about, gasping at what he found.

This clump of brush was artificial. It could be moved back, leaving an opening large enough for a team of horses.

Excited by this find, Steve inspected the ground between the tunnel mouth and the hoof-churned pass. His pulse hammered. At last he had the answer to the mysterious disappearance of men and silver!

Screened from the town by the hill, the loaded train was turned into this hidden tunnel. An empty train, exactly like the one loaded with silver, was ready and the trains were interchanged; the bullion-loaded wagons kept here in the tunnel while an exact replica was sent on to its destruction. When the interchanging of the trains had been accomplished, blankets were dragged over the ground and all traces of turning the loaded wagons in and the empty wagons out was obliterated by blanket drags. The steady breeze down the pass helped, shifting the fine particles of earth until the blanket drags were gone. This was the magical act, this was where the raiders of last night had vanished, giving the baffling appearance of having returned to town after their massacre.

Irony touched Steve. So the stolen silver was here beneath Virginia City's feet, right here in the bowels of Nugget Knob. But even with this important find, he knew he could not go to these men who condemned him and tell them. In their rage, they would shoot him down before he could talk.

Steve turned away from the screened tunnel. This was a job for his friends. This tunnel had to be bottled up and the renegades flushed from their lair.

If his father was alive, he was in that tunnel; and Matt Barton, too. Perhaps more small mine owners were entombed there also. Raiding the nest would tell.

Still cautious, Steve dropped into Two Bit Canyon and headed for the Barton cabin. In view of it, he stopped. Strange horses and mules stood at the rack by the tiny corral.

Guns palmed, he crept to the door. "Deborah!" he called softly.

The door opened quickly and the girl stepped out. "Steve," she said, a glad lift to her voice.

"Who's here?"

"Miners," she answered. "Two of them shot and another beaten, protecting their mines."

Absently, Steve reached in his pocket and drew forth the five little pieces of silver. He shook them in his hand as he murmured. "Maybe they'll ride with me. I've found the outlaw hole-up and I'll need men."

"Father?" asked the girl fearfully.

Steve shook his head. "We'll find out soon."

Deborah glanced curiously at his hand. Steve opened it and she looked at the silver pieces spread out.

"Skull!" she murmured, looking up at him puzzledly.

Steve stared down at the pieces. The coins *did* spell that word. Out of a thousand combinations, Deborah had shaken out the right one. Skull! Keg Silers' mine.

"You think—" began Deborah.

"I'll find out," interrupted Steve. "Tell the boys I'll be back tomorrow morning."

"Be careful, Steve!" she pleaded.

He squeezed her hand. Then he was gone up the canyon, racing swiftly to beat the fast-failing night. He wanted a hiding place from which he could command a view of the Skull's daily workings; for when darkness came again, he would learn the secret his father's enigmatic message was trying to convey.

STEVE made the shelter of outcropping rock on the side of Sun Mountain just as daylight broke. Directly below him sprawled Virginia City with its billowing canvas roofs. Across an eroded canyon the shafts of the Silver Nugget and Skull were two monstrous black eyes. The tailings of the two mines jutted like spade chins from the side of the hill. The ground was so fashioned as to give ore cars a start down tunnel on their narrow-gauge track.

The Skull worked full blast. Mule-drawn cars shuttled in and out of the shaft, taking their loads to the crusher and smelter.

At midday the shifts changed. Rollicking miners surged up the mountain, while a tired crew moved down on the pleasures of the city.

The day droned on uneventfully. Steve was fretting against the inactivity when night finally shut down.

Rising, he threaded his way down the side of Sun Mountain and began his wary approach to the Skull. Torches flared about the tunnel mouth. His only chance of entrance was to catch an empty train out here in the darkness. He took up a position beside the tracks and waited.

Creaking cars moved toward him, the mule skinner luridly urging the animal. When the head car was past and around the bend, Steve caught the next to last one. He stretched out flat on the metal floor.

The cars gained momentum as they hit the down grade. The starry sky slid past Steve's eyes, then torch light, then stygian darkness.

Steve quit the car and let it trundle on into the bowels of the earth. He waited a moment, tuned to danger. The men worked at a low level and he need not fear discovery for the moment. Eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he stalked forward, guns thrust ahead of him.

He worked deeper and deeper into the tunnel, stepping behind a stanchion to avoid a surfaceward ore train. He could have reached out and touched the driver.

Then he was going on, growing more alert and sensitive to the danger closing about him. The clang of shovel and pick came to him, warning him that he was nearing the end of the shaft.

Rounding a curve in the tunnel, Steve faded behind a timber. His lips creased to keep a gasp from escaping them.

A huge room was open before him, bathed in yellow torch light. The tracks circled here. Against the dank walls stood boxes of bullion. Men laughed and joked in their rough way as they loaded bullion

bars into the dump cars and shoveled quartz on top. A tunnel led off the other side of the cavern; and Steve could see the tail gate of a wagon in the gloom. The Skull was part of the mystery, the exit for the stolen bullion bars.

THE incredible cunning of it stunned Steve; stunned him because of its simplicity. Keg Silers was the renegade leader. Being a donor, he was in the position to know every move made. Thus he could place his men on the loaded train, have them take the bullion down the pass and turn into the screened tunnel. Then he would turn the empty train over to them and let them continue on their way. The bullion bars were unloaded in this room, reloaded into ore cars and quartz piled atop. Thus they were carried to Keg Silers' crusher and remade, just as if his Skull Mine had produced the bars.

A quick look about the cavern proved to Steve it was the Skull's diggings which had petered out. This then was Keg's motivation for the huge theft. He had turned his unproductive mine into a renegade nest, burrowing his other tunnel into the pass for his scheme.

Keg's plan was far-reaching and thorough. The dynamiting of the *Slocum* by Black Mike and the way the story was turned to throw full suspicion upon the Alcorns attested to that. This mine was a fort to conjure with. Stacks of rifles and ammunition lay against the far wall. Silers was prepared to withstand a siege.

Now Steve flattened against the tunnel wall as Drummer Krum's guttural voice sounded behind him. Yellow torch light flared through an opening in the shaft and the burly giant, with Keg at his side, led the way up tunnel. Steve drew a deep breath, fighting the urge to follow and have a showdown.

The aperture used by Krum and Silers drew Steve's attention. He felt his way through the darkness. Penetrating the narrow shaft, sounds of the bullion room died away. Then the hair on his neck bristled as the rattling of chains came to him. He felt the walls widen and whispered impulsively, "Dad! Dad!"

A pitiful curse guided him to John Alcorn's side. He reached down, putting his hand on the man whose chains rattled as he moved.

"They got you, too!" his father said weakly.

"No! No, they haven't," Steve assured him. Fury gripped him as he felt the emaciated flesh beneath his hand.

"You were a long time coming," muttered John. "I left my silver pieces; I didn't have a pencil to use, so I scratched it on with a pin. I found out you didn't have the silver just after you had gone. I left the message and tried to buck Keg and the boys—"

"Boys?" interrupted Steve questioningly.

"Damn their lousy hides!" his father said. "Silers, McGrew, Urban and Gorman. They're the combine I tried to warn you against, son. They aim to own all the Washoe country. They keep us just enough alive to write out the deeds to our mines."

"Us?" queried Steve breathlessly.

"I ain't alone," croaked John. "There's Nick Sours, Jack Horton, Archie Twitchell, Matt Barton and some more. Once a day Drummer Krum tries to make us sign. We've held out so far."

Sickened at the thought of their sufferings, Steve said: "You don't have to hold out any longer. I'm getting you out right now!"

"Not a chance," came a blunt voice. "We're anchored tighter than hell's gate hinges. Even if we could break away, we couldn't make it up tunnel."

"Twitchell's right, son," agreed John Alcorn. "But we can wait until you come back."

"I won't be long," vowed Steve. Then he moved farther into the darkness, calling, "Matt! Matt!" He knelt down beside the man who answered. "I just wanted to tell you your daughter is safe," he said.

Matt Barton's thin fingers clawed at the youngster's legs. "Thank God! God bless you, boy."

Steve was thankful for the darkness as two tears rolled down his bronze cheeks. Then he was turning back to his father, anger whipping violently through him. He hastily recounted all that had happened since the steamer had blown up. When he finished, his father said:

"It pays to be kind to people, son. I helped Frenchy Lou out one time when she was broke. She's repaid me by helping you escape. She couldn't tell you more because Keg owns her lock, stock and gambling."

Steve straightened. "Then I'll repay her personally by getting her out from under Keg. I'll be back, dad!"

He turned and felt his way from this cavern of horror. He knew everything now and had only one course. Some way, somehow, he must make Virginia City believe him —even if it cost him his life.

CHAPTER IX

THE TOWN RALLIES

STEVE worked his way warily up shaft. To be discovered now would ruin all his plans and condemn those tortured men to death in their chamber. When the yellow light of the tunnel mouth loomed ahead, he halted and studied the exit.

Two men were on guard. They could not be passed by a quick run. He had to leave the way he came in —on an ore car. But that was difficult since they were loaded coming out. Drawing his gun, Steve stepped back into the darkness.

A mule crawled slowly past him. When the dim form of the driver was limned against the light outside, Steve struck. The driver rolled off his seat. Steve took over, tugging the brim of his hat down.

The train came into the open, the mule turning by force of habit. One of the guards called: "Working hell out of you, eh, Strip?"

Steve nodded an answer. The cars left the torch light and entered the gloom. Steve jumped, making the descent in huge leaps. A shout rose behind him, but he was gone in the night before pursuit could get under way.

He lined things up as he headed for Two Bit Canyon. The dead lookout would be found by now. That would cause wonder. His escape just now would fill the combine with fear and cause them to move the bullion faster. The scheme building in Steve's mind banked on that.

He entered the Barton cabin boldly now, nodding to his friends. A group of miners stared at him suspiciously. Steve ignored them and went to Deborah, who stood in the shadows. Her lovely face showed concern for him.

"Deborah, I found your father— and my dad—" he said in a low voice.

Her hand went to his arm. "Thank God," she murmured.

He turned to Denver. "Where's Boomer?" he demanded.

"Left last night," answered Den-

ver. "When he heard about the silver spelling out Skull, he high-tailed. To join up—I guess."

Steve shrugged.

"You have found important things?" asked Sun Yat quietly.

"Yes." said Steve. In a rush of words he told what he had found. "We'll have to rally the whole town. The Skull is a fort. Between the dead gun guard, the pistol-whipped driver and Boomer, we'll have to act fast—before they get the bullion all moved."

"You wouldn't last two minutes telling that story in town," one of the miners said.

"I don't believe it," stated another.

Deborah came to the table and faced them stanchly. "Give him a chance," she urged. "You've nothing to lose."

Steve bit his lip as the miners studied the girl. Then he was leaning forward, talking softly, for it was clear that her plea had made them more willing to listen.

For a half hour, Steve explained his plans. Sometimes his voice rose to fever pitch, then dropped to an angry snarl. When he straightened to await their reaction, Denver said ominously. "If you jiggers don't fall in line, we'll do it ourselves."

It was clear that if Steve's plan failed or did not get support, it meant death for himself and his friends. He drove his final point home: "You'll be safe until after I tip my hand."

A miner nodded and rose from his chair. "You better be right," he grunted.

"You'll be safe until it happens," Steve repeated grimly.

One by one, the miners accepted his plan. They turned from the cabin in a body to carry out Steve's wishes. Washoe took a different direction to complete his chore.

STEVE topped the ridge of Two Bit Canyon and led the roundabout way to the Skull shaft. He guided his group to the top of the hill and came down from above. Guards would be alert at the tunnel mouth now, carefully watching the city. Steve picked the way over the rocky terrain. Torches still flared in front of the Skull. Activity had increased, with ore train after ore train going to the smelter.

Steve was gripped by mixed emotions as he led the way down to the tracks. If Silers moved all the bullion before dawn, everything would be lost. Steve knew that he and his four faithful friends would be caught on the face of the cliff at the mercy of both miners and townsmen, for proof of his seemingly fantastic story would be lacking. He sheltered his men behind a rock and his palms began to sweat as he awaited the coming of day.

A foreboding grew within him. Skull activity was faltering. The dark above was turning to gray. Like a beacon, dawn flared in the east.

Below them, groups of townsmen were sauntering up the hill. They advanced at tangents, as Steve had directed. Something had to happen quickly.

Denver gripped Steve's arm. The lounging Skull guards had turned to look down tunnel. The head of a mule poked its nose from the dark shaft and tugged ore cars up the slight grade. Steve stiffened. Here was payoff or death!

The driver and plodding mule came on with maddening slowness. The four behind the rock ceased to breathe. When the center of the train was abreast them, Steve surged up.

"Tip it!" he shouted.

The driver muttered a hoarse

croak and tried to grab his gun. Sun Yat's flying body was too quick for him. The driver lost his seat at the impact and rolled down the hill.

Like an avalanche, Steve, Denver and Hump hit the center of the cars. Heaving mightily, they tipped one on edge. The quick surge of the car jerked the nearest off the track. It tipped over the whole train.

The cars went crashing down after the driver, their ore splaying in all directions. Then amid the quartz confetti, bullion bars sailed through the air like bright lances.

A shout went up from the townsmen advancing upon the hill. To Steve's left a pistol spoke. Steve whirled, returning the fire, and a guard flung out his arms and tumbled down the hill.

Denver's weapon cracked, disposing of the other. A man stuck his head from the shaft and yelled. He brought a rifle to his shoulder and drove Steve and his companions to cover. They raced around the butt of the hill and awaited the shouting townsmen.

Steve was grinning now, a thrill of excitement gripping him. He had tipped Keg Silers' hand. He had exposed the combine, and now the town was rallying to his cause.

CHAPTER X

SHOWDOWN FOR THE SKULL

STEVE and his men were halfway down the hill when an explosion rocked the ground.

"There goes the rear tunnel," Steve shouted. "Good old Washoe! No one will get out that way."

His three companions chorused their jubilation. The crowd surging up the hill was augmented by others attracted by the shots, their leaders the miners who had carried out Steve's orders.

"You're right, Alcorn!" one swore. "By cracky, we're with you."

"It won't be easy," said Steve, for even now the men of the Skull were barricading the tunnel mouth, preparing for a siege. In this moment, Steve thought of Boomer, and how he must feel trapped in the dank tunnel with the rest. Well, he had been looking for loot—and had found it the hard way.

"You with guns," ordered Steve. "Hold them in the shaft. The rest get weapons. There's Bull Urban, Travers Gorman, Keg Silers and Tip McGrew, who might still be in town."

"I saw them go up to the Skull just after midnight," said one of the townsmen. "They're there now."

With a shout, the hardrock miners surged angrily up the hill. A salvo from the mine cut many down and drove the rest to cover.

Steve swore in dismay. The renegades had full control. The steep bank meant suicide to the townsmen, for the outlaws could hold their position as long as their provisions held out. And at night they had a good chance of escaping in small groups.

"We'll never crack them," a townsman said. "They'll get away from us sure."

"We could surround the hill," declared another dourly, "but it would be too thin a chain to keep them from breaking through at night."

While he listened, Steve studied the hill. He said slowly: "We can crack that place. How many will volunteer?"

As a body, they stepped forward.

Steve selected a company of eight, including his friends. One man was an expert powder monkey. Steve left instructions for the rest to charge up the hill once the entrance was forced. Then he was leading his sui-

cide crew to the Skull mill.

He ordered Denver and the others to get a line of ore cars ready, then spoke to the powder monkey: "This depends on you. You set a charge in the first car to blow that barricade. If it isn't done right—"

"Don't worry," interrupted the man. "I could blow a hole in a china teacup without disturbing the saucer."

Steve supervised the ripping of planks from the mill wall to cover the last car. When all was ready, he surveyed the scene. The blast was timed to explode as the first car hit the barricade of logs at the tunnel mouth. The planks covering the last car would break concussion for the eight volunteers.

STEVE ordered the rest inside and placed the planks, leaving an opening for himself after he had pushed the train around this protecting shoulder of earth and started it rolling toward the shaft.

As he was about to light the fuse, he turned to a shout from down hill. A blue-clad soldier of the United States army struggled up the slope, twisting and dodging the sniping from the tunnel mouth. A contingent of soldiers mingled with the waiting miners below. Steve's heart swelled at sight of the American flag unfurled in the center of the battle line.

The stocky figure made safety and came on toward the mill. When he stepped inside, Steve cried, "Boomer!" Seven heads peeped over the car rim and Hump Mulvey swore, "Scalp me for a Piute!"

The stocky ex-boomer chuckled and drew off his gloves. "Lieutenant Carter Rowel," he said with a grin. "Commanding Company C. You can't lose me, Alcorn."

Steve's eyes were wide with surprise as he pumped the soldier's hand. Here was the man the townsmen had spoken of the night of the wagon massacre, the one they thought was yellow. Steve himself had been completely fooled. Just an hour ago he had felt sorry that Boomer must go with the rest of the renegades in the mine, for he had taken a liking to his stocky companion.

"I thought my men would be needed," explained the lieutenant. "I left to get them the other night when Deborah told me about tracing out the word Skull on the silver pieces. That was all I needed to know."

Steve grinned sheepishly. "I thought you were in the tunnel."

"I will be," grinned Rowel, "if this blast works out." He got into the last car with the others.

Denver chuckled. "A thirty-a-month-and-beaner."

"And slim rations of them," said Hump.

A lump came into Steve's throat. These men would jest in the face of death. It was a pure gamble that any one of them would come out alive. Yet they accepted the chance as they accepted life—with great relish.

Steve lit the fuse. It hissed and crawled like a flaming snake. He

threw his weight against the cars and started them rolling. Bunching all his power, he nosed them around the ledge, then jumped inside.

Slowly the car rolled down the incline. A shout came from the mine shaft, but a more stirring cry lifted from below. A hail of bullets splattered around the car. They ricocheted off the metal, whining into space.

The front car hit the barricade, coming to a jarring halt. Sweat beaded Steve's forehead. Then the car holding his squad was lifting, the planks sailing lazily off the top. The volunteers spilled out.

Unhurt, the men scrambled to their feet. The explosion had blown half the barricade away. Led by Steve and Boomer, the squad stormed the opening. Townsmen and soldiers swarmed up the hill, rebel cries adding to the din.

Unmindful of the lead plucking at his clothes and flesh, Steve closed with the renegades. At his right, Denver clubbed mighty strokes with his pistol barrel. Hump Mulvey struck like a hornet, jabbing his knife home. Sun Yat chopped with his hatchet as coolly as if he were gathering kindling. On Steve's left, Lieutenant Carter Rowel clubbed with fist and gun, a dynamic pile driver whom none could stop.

Overwhelmed, the renegades broke and ran down tunnel. The force coming up crowded in. Steve and the lieutenant led the pack in chase.

Steve became conscious of the blood flowing down his cheek, but he pushed on seeking Keg Silers. The Skull owner and his three cohorts had shown their true colors by not being at the barricade with their men. They were back in the safety of the huge room.

Suddenly Steve sensed the danger of this headlong flight down tunnel. He shouted to halt. His command carried back along the line.

"Jammed too close," he told Rowel. "We'll be shot down. We'll have to go down in small groups."

THE orders were relayed. Steve broke for the cavern that held his father and the others. Boomer pounded along at his side. Directly behind came Denver, Hump and Sun Yat.

A bullet smashed into Steve's shoulder and he went down. The lieutenant tripped over him, and the rest piled up, saving themselves. A leaden sheet swept the tunnel. The renegades were massed at the chamber mouth, raking the shaft with lead as they made a last stand.

Clenching his teeth against the pain, Steve clutched at Rowel. "Go back," he commanded. "Get everybody out of the shaft. We haven't a chance. Get a car of dynamite ready."

The lieutenant did not argue. He knew Steve was right. Further attack would result in terrific losses. No mass of men could get close enough to storm the main chamber.

As the lieutenant turned up tunnel again, Steve warned the others to keep close to the floor. Cautiously they crawled to the cavern opening.

Safe from renegade lead, Steve stationed Denver at the tunnel mouth and called softly, "Dad!"

His answer came in Drummer Krum's guttural voice: "Alcorn, you will die now!"

Steve and his companions stood stock-still in the stygian darkness.

Hump Mulvey said, "I'll strike a match," and dove sideways to escape the giant's shot.

There was the sound of a *flick*, and something stirred air at Steve's

cheek. Then a meaty *chock!* Krum screamed, and eerie silence followed the sound. Steve passed a trembling hand across his brow. Unerringly, Sun Yat had thrown his hatchet, and was even now quoting stoically: "'A keen blade makes the weakest strong and the strongest weak.'"

Shaken, Steve answered the weak call of his father. With the aid of the others, the chains were pulled loose from the shoring timbers.

"One at a time," ordered Steve. "Carry them on your backs!"

Painfully, he swung his father over his shoulder and felt his way to the main shaft. Then he was running, stumbling from unsure footing as he made for the opening. Behind him pounded the others, the emaciated miners clinging to their backs. In a bunch, they burst into the open.

Lieutenant Carter Rowel met them. He was alone here on this shoulder of the hill. One ore car stood near the entrance of the mine, a fuse trailing from its explosive cargo.

The lieutenant's face was more stern than Steve had ever seen it. "I'm remembering the steamer *Slocum*," Rowel said bleakly. "Those were Company C men aboard."

Denver shifted the tattered miner he carried and stepped to the lieutenant's side. "I'll lend a hand," he said. "My brother was master of the *Slocum*."

Rowel nodded understandingly. He struck the match and the fuse snaked into flame. Denver surged his bulk against the car and sent it into the tunnel. Then the six of them were running downhill with their burdens to the sea of watching faces.

Steve stopped at the edge of the crowd and lowered his father carefully to the ground. John Alcorn stood on unsteady feet, his arm linked in his son's, his pale, haggard face alight.

Nearby the other men who had been rescued from their tunnel prison stood in a little group. Steve's eyes rested for a moment on Deborah Barton, who had found her way through the crowd to her father's side.

Then the ground shook, and there was a deep rumble like the growl of a giant dog. On its heels came waves of cheers from the assembled townspeople. John Alcorn and his son looked at each other. This was the end of the Skull and the ruthless murderers who had tried to wrest a fortune from honest men. To serve their ends they had tried to blacken and discredit the name of Alcorn, but they had failed. After today no name would be more honored in the Washoe country.

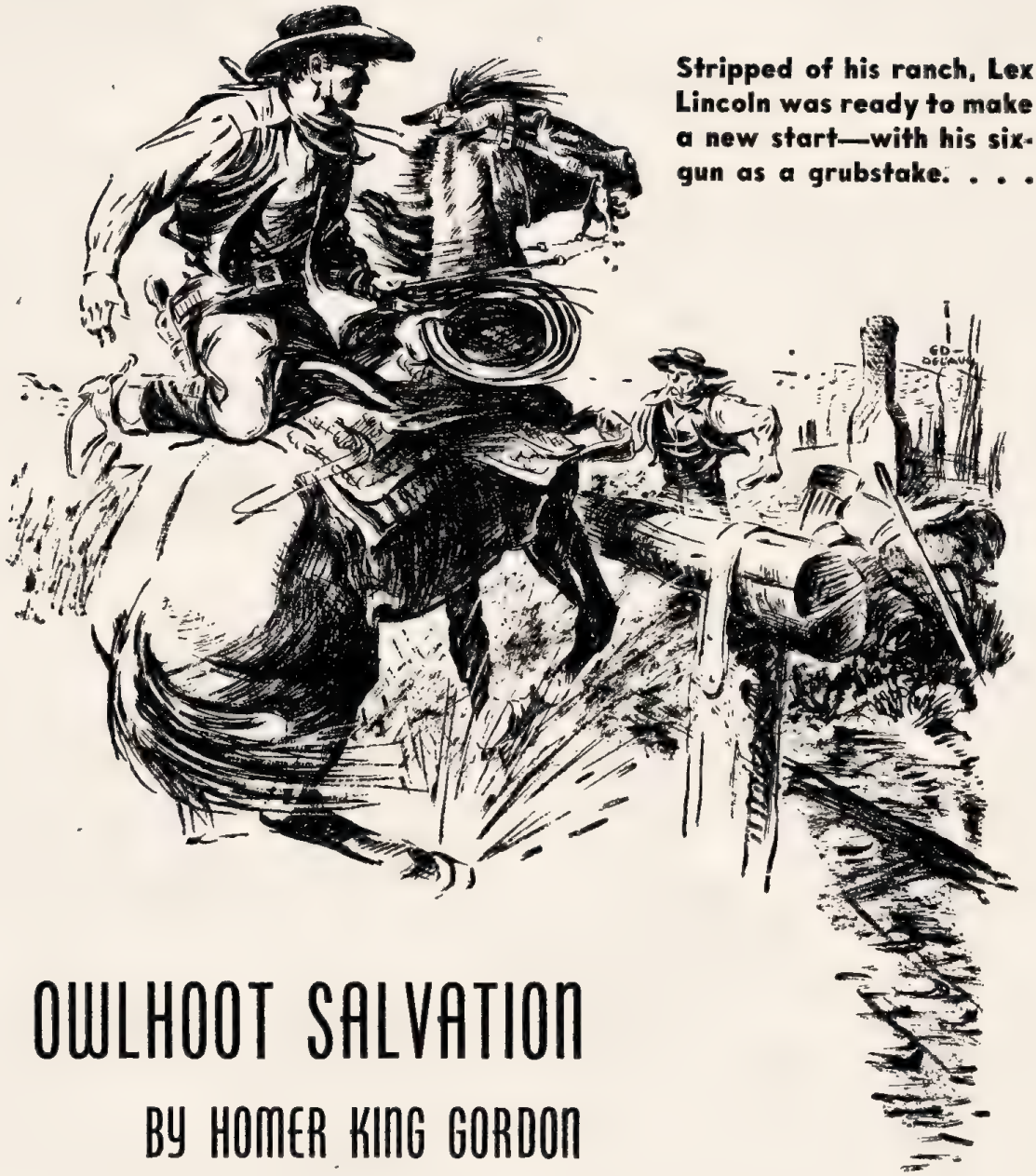
THE END.

Caught in a flaming feud between ruthless cattle kings and powerful timber barons, Jim Rideout dared the fury of both on his

DEATH WATCH IN THE SHOSHONES

DON'T MISS this breath-taking frontier drama by Perry Westwood, coming in the next issue of WESTERN ADVENTURES. Also fast-action stories by Ed Earl Repp, George A. Shaftel and a host of your favorite Western authors.

On Sale At All Newsstands December 4th



Stripped of his ranch, Lex Lincoln was ready to make a new start—with his six-gun as a grubstake. . . .

OWLHOOT SALVATION

BY HOMER KING GORDON

A PLUME of dirty yellow-and-black smoke was waving up from the San Simon valley in the hot shimmering afternoon haze. When it was even with the tops of the foothills it mushroomed out to make a cloudy canopy over that part of southeastern Arizona.

Lex Lincoln was working with a spade, trying to clear out the mysteriously rock-and-mud-choked spring water tank that supplied his Link L Ranch with water when he noticed the smoke.

He knew immediately what it meant. Mud-spattered, stained with sweat and so tired he was numb, he grabbed his horse and raced across the range.

He was within a hundred yards of the smoldering ranchhouse, the pile of smoking hay and charred

timbers that had been his barn, and the blazing corral rails when his exhausted horse stumbled and stopped, feet wide apart and trembling, breathing with great shuddering gasps. Lex threw himself out of the saddle and ran toward the ruined ranchhouse.

Pee Wee Winkler, the gnomelike, bowlegged cowboy, who worked for Lex, came out to meet him. Pee Wee's gray hair and bushy eyebrows were singed and blacked with smoke and ashes and his shirt potholed with burned spots. He had a charred rib of beef in one hand. A small pile of odds and ends, kitchen pans, old pictures, blankets and a broken rocking chair were stacked out away from the ruins of the house.

"I saved a meal out of it anyway," Pee Wee remarked. "Boss, she shore burned purty an' fast. By the time I got here, that's all I could git out."

Lex wiped his sleeve across his eyes. He stared dully at his ruined ranch buildings.

"Well, this wipes me out," he said wearily.

"A man's never wiped out while he can laugh," Pee Wee declared cheerfully. "Boss, I'd rather it was me losin' every cent I ever had than you."

"Where were you when it started?" Lex asked.

"Well, I knowed you were cleanin' out that spring an' I figgered maybe I'd better cut up in the hills an' head off as many drifters as I could from gettin' over on the Horseshoe D range. I know'd Peck Damon would make trouble if he could," the old cowboy explained. "Both house an' barn was blazin' when I got down here."

"I reckon none of Damon's men could tell how it started," Lex said bitterly. "He's got a mortgage on my land, an' now my buildings are gone, my spring's been dynamited an' my cattle's starvin' for water, so he don't even have to steal them. They'll naturally drift over to his range an' water."

"Maybe it wasn't Damon," Pee Wee protested.

"Who else would it be? He set out to clean me an' I'm cleaned. He's like a fat overstuffed spider layin' his webs for little suckers like me. He's got me, but maybe he's got just a little more than he bargained for."

"Here he comes now," Pee Wee warned.

Four men on horses wearing the Horseshoe D brand were approaching from across the range. The horses did not show signs of being hard ridden. Three of the men reined up, but the fourth rode into the yard and came to a stop before Lex and Pee Wee. Without any surprise, Lex saw that it was Peck Damon.

DAMON had long legs but an unusually short, fat body and flat, rubbery face which seemed to be set against his shoulders without any connecting neck. His coppery eyes were set in slanting slits of flesh against high cheekbones, giving them an almost oriental cast.

"Got any insurance?" Damon asked abruptly.

"You know I haven't," retorted Lex.

"This about finishes you then," Damon commented, "Come down to the Copper Tank tomorrow an' I'll make you an offer for what livestock you've got left. I'm foreclosin' on the mortgage."

"I reckon you wouldn't know who put a stick or two of dynamite in that rock overhang by my spring, or who set a match to these?" Lex said ironically.

"I know your stuff's driftin' over the Horseshoe D line an' drinkin' at my waterholes an' you'll either sell at my price or I'll charge my own price for grass an' water," Damon declared. "You're through, Lincoln."

"I'm through tryin' to make an honest livin'," agreed Lex. "I've slaved an' starved an' sweated an' you simply sat back an' waited for the time to come when it would be profitable to clamp down. But I'm not gettin' out. I'm warnin' you, Damon. From now on I ride at night. The Copper Tank is first on my list, an' I know other places where you keep your money. I'm coming after you."

Damon stared at him, expressionless.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought. Come on, boys," he grunted.

Lex watched them ride out of the yard. Pee Wee was at his elbow.

"You might've knowed you coudn't bluff him, Lex," he protested.

"I'm not bluffing," Lex said quietly. "Wish I had enough cash to pay you off, Pee Wee, but I haven't. If you're back this way, though, in a few days I will have."

"You're firin' me?" Pee Wee asked incredulously.

"I'm quittin' the ranch business, except with a long rope an' cash sales," Lex declared. "It don't pay. Not around here. What I'm doin' next will pay or else I won't have to worry long."

He turned away from Pee Wee and walked back to where his horse was swaying, ready to drop at any time. He had ridden it almost to death, he knew, and the knowledge increased his bitterness. Slipping off the saddle and bridle, he put his gun to its head and pulled the trigger, stepping away as it fell.

Carrying the saddle and bridle, Lex added them to the pile of things Pee Wee had managed to get out of the fire.

"Better pack up your saddlebags with anything you want an' get ridin'," he advised Pee Wee. "It won't be healthy for you hangin' around me any longer."

"Boss, listen," Pee Wee protested. "I gotta proposition to make—"

"Make it somewhere else," Lex said impatiently. "I'm tired of your preachin' about every cloud havin' a silver linin', an' actin' like a doormat. I know what I'm doin'."

Lex had not been bluffing with Damon, but he was bluffing with Pee Wee. The old cowboy had worked for him since the time Lex bought the ranch and registered his Link L brand. They had been through plenty of lean times, but Pee Wee had never complained nor lost his cheerful grin. Lex knew he was losing about the best friend he had ever had.

Walking off, he pretended indifference as Pee Wee slowly washed his face and hands at the horse trough, and then rolling up one of the blankets taken from the house, mounted his horse and rode down the trail.

Lex wiped his smarting eyes with his bandanna, and set his teeth together. It was better for Pee Wee this way, he told himself stubbornly.

TAKING his saddle and bridle and rope, Lex went up to the meadow pasture and caught a fresh horse, and once in the saddle, he turned up toward the only livable building left on the ranch. That was a small log line cabin, stocked with a few meager supplies, and equipped with a couple of bunks and worn blankets.

Putting his horse out on a picket

line at the cabin, Lex went down to the little stream that ran past it, to wash his face and get a drink. It was a mountain stream that came down off the Horseshoe D range and only touched the Link L with a small bend at the cabin. Normally the stream carried plenty of water the year around. Now there was only a trickle of water coming down.

Lex stared at it with newly-aroused anger. Evidently Damon had been afraid he might try and impound some of the water or improvise a water tank there for his stock, and had managed to damn or divert it higher up somewhere on the Horseshoe D meadows.

Enough water remained for Lex's needs and his brain was too tired to do more than condemn Damon for this fresh example of greed. He was too tired even to want food. Throwing himself on one of the musty straw-filled bunks, he pulled a blanket around his shoulders and dropped off to sleep.

It was late in the morning when he woke up, relaxed and hungry. Taking the coffeepot and iron cook pot, he went down to the stream for water and found that it had practically stopped flowing. There were enough rock-walled holes for his immediate needs, but these would soon dry up.

Damon must be thinking he was going to try and set up headquarters at the line cabin, Lex decided, or otherwise he would never have bothered to divert the stream. Suspecting it might be a trap to get him over on the Horseshoe D range, he made no effort that day to find out how the diversion of the water had been managed.

The Copper Tank, Damon's saloon and gambling hall, was located a few miles over the ridge where the Tombstone road crossed the Paradise road. A cluster of wooden buildings had been built at the crossroads. Damon was reputed to own most of them. The place was known as Copper Town, although it existed more because Damon's Copper Tank was there than for any other reason.

This was where Damon lived and made his business headquarters. It was his town, completely surrounded as it was by Horseshoe D range. There was no bank there. That was over in Paradise, although controlled by Damon's money, a fact which Lex had discovered only after signing a mortgage there on his ranch.

But Damon handled most of his business from the Copper Tank, and that was where Lex intended making a call, late that night.

KNOWING that it might be the last opportunity he would have for sleep in a good many hours, Lex stretched out on the bunk late in the afternoon and forced himself to lay there until he went to sleep.

Several hours later he was awakened by the sound of a horseman approaching. Lex got up and, gun in hand, waited, backed up against the logs until the horse stopped. Then flinging the door open, he stepped quickly outside, with his gun raised. Abruptly he lowered the gun and ran forward.

It was Pee Wee, swaying in his saddle and trying to grin in spite of a pain-twisted face. A white rag, stained with blood, was wrapped around his throat. Lex caught him as he slumped off his horse.

As he carried Pee Wee into the cabin and laid him on one of the bunks, Lex realized for the first time that the old cowboy was nothing much more than skin and bones and sinew.

Pee Wee started to mumble something and froth came to his lips. Lex wiped it away.

"Don't try to talk, Pee Wee," he said soothingly. "I'll ride hell-bent for Doc Benson over at Paradise."

Pee Wee caught him by the wrist, his gnarled like bird talons.

"No use . . . Water," he whispered.

There was no water in the cabin. Lex ran down to the stream, swearing as he had to hunt for a hole where the water had not been stirred up. Pee Wee's eyes were closed when Lex got back, but he opened them as Lex raised him up, and managed to splash some of the water between his lips.

"Spring," Pee Wee gasped. "Saddle pack—"

His words were hoarse mumbles and Lex turned his head away to keep from looking at his agony. Pee Wee gripped his hand fiercely for an instant and then his whole body relaxed.

Lex did not need a doctor to know that his old friend was dead. Laying him back on the bunk, he drew a blanket over his face, and then went over to the wall to rest his own head against the rough logs for a little while.

Lex went out and stripped the bridle and saddle off Pee Wee's horse. Inside the cabin he remembered Pee Wee had been trying to tell him something about the saddle pack. He looked through the old cowboy's saddlebags. There was nothing but odds and ends of gear in one. In the other he found a canvas sack, with the Horseshoe D brand and the name "The Copper Tank" stenciled on the canvas.

The sack was filled with money. Lex emptied it on the cabin floor and counted the soiled bills. They totaled just a few dollars under twenty-five hundred. Lex stared at the money and then at the blanket-covered form on the bunk.

"You loyal old fool," he said softly. "You wouldn't let me turn road agent, but you went and stuck up the Copper Tank yourself just for me."

He owed Damon two thousand dollars on the mortgage plus a year's interest. It seemed plain enough what had happened. Pee Wee had known what he owed. There was usually that much money in sight on Damon's poker tables. Pee Wee had taken what he thought was needed, crammed it in a sack, and then had been shot making his getaway.

He had either guessed or spied out Lex's hide-away and had ridden there, probably knowing he was dying but afraid to go for a doctor for fear Lex might not get the money. Slowly Lex put the money back in the Copper Tank sack and went out to saddle his horse.

THE hitch racks in Copper Town were crowded with horses. Carbide lights with bright tin reflectors lit up the front of Damon's saloon and the inside where the room was divided roughly into a bar and dance hall and into the gambling room with Damon's private office off the back of that.

When Lex stalked into the saloon, a momentary hush interrupted the conversations of the men along the bar. The piano player kept on playing, but as Lex walked down the length of the bar and back toward Damon's office, he noticed a couple of Damon's men following slowly after him.

The office door was open. Damon was seated behind his flat desk, facing the door. He saw Lex advancing but made no move, although

his hands were under the edge of the table.

Lex did not hesitate. Walking into the office, he threw the sack of money on the desk in front of Damon.

"I guess you know where that come from," he said grimly.

"What'd you want?" demanded Damon. His eyes slid past Lex toward the door. Without turning, Lex knew that Damon's two bodyguards were in the doorway.

"Pee Wee's dead," Lex stated. "I appreciate his intentions, but I do my own robbing. Just to get the record straight, I wanted to tell you I didn't know what he planned or pulled off until it was done. After I bury him, I'm comin' here myself, an' you better have more than two guns at my back when I get here."

He turned and rubbed shoulders with the two men at the door as they grudgingly stepped back far enough to let him leave the office. Walking with an even, unhurried pace, he left the saloon. Swinging into the saddle, he rode on up the canyon to Paradise.

Doc Benson was in his office when Lex walked into it. Besides being the only doctor within miles, Benson was also deputy coroner for the county.

"Pee Wee's up in my line cabin, dead with a bullet through his throat," Lex explained briefly. "I want him to have a decent burial in spite of what happened. I reckon there'll have to be an inquest. He had about twenty-five hundred dollars in a Copper Tank money sack when he rode up. I guess you know what that means as well as I did. He died before he could tell me what happened. I took the money back to Damon."

Doc Benson, a short, chunky, shrewd-faced man, stared at Lex.

"You drunk?" he asked mildly.

"I'm tellin' you Pee Wee's dead," Lex said impatiently. "He must've held up the Copper Tank an' then been shot trying to get away. He knew I owed Damon a couple thousand dollars an' that Damon was about to foreclose. I also told Pee Wee I meant to turn road agent. I guess he thought he could keep me from doin' it."

SIT down, Lex," Doc Benson said soberly. Lex sat on the edge of the old chair he indicated.

"You say you gave Damon the sack with the money in it?" Doc Benson asked.

Lex nodded. "I stopped there on my way up here," he explained.

"That was Pee Wee's own money," the medico said simply. "It's what he had saved up out of his wages after workin' a long time to do it. I was in the bank this afternoon when Pee Wee took the money out. He asked for a sack to put it in and the teller handed him that Copper Tank money sack. Damon had just made a deposit out of the sack an' said he didn't have any objections to Pee Wee using it."

Lex wiped his sleeve across his eyes.

"Then Pee Wee didn't hold up the Copper Tank—and I've given his money to that double-crosser. Pee Wee tried to talk, but he couldn't. I didn't dream he had money saved up." Suddenly Lex's face took on a grim expression. "You say Damon was there and saw Pee Wee get his money out—"

"Now take it easy a minute," Doc Benson said hastily. "Suppose you tell me what this is all about?"

"I was desperate," Lex confessed. "After my spring was dynamited an' my ranch buildings burned, I guess I went loco."

"What else did Pee Wee say," asked Doc Benson.

"I didn't understand. There wasn't much time. I thought he said something about the spring."

"You haven't been down there?"

"Not since yesterday. It was all choked up with mud and rocks," Lex answered.

"Well, some time after you left, another part of that overhang fell," Doc Benson explained. "Pee Wee told me about it at the bank. Seems as though there's a stream of water shooting out, an' I understand the mountain stream that runs through the Horseshoe D has been completely diverted an' now comes out on your Link L from where your old spring was. This entire valley's honeycombed with caves. Of course the Horseshoe D don't have to have that stream, but it'll put Damon in a hole if he has to do without it."

"But the spring's miles away from Damon's creek," protested Lex.

"I'm tellin' you what happened, not how," Doc Benson said testily. "Your spring might have been just a leak in a reservoir that tapped the creek. When this last bunch of rocks slid down, it evidently opened a new outlet for the reservoir. Pee Wee had it all figured out that you could pay off the mortgage and have Damon over a barrel."

Lex stood up. "I'm going back to the Copper Tank," he announced.

"Before you do, I might as well tell you that there's a dead man in here that was picked up early tonight on that road from Copper Town to your ranch. It's that Frisco Red who worked for Damon. He's got a couple bullets through his middle an' had a handkerchief tied over his face when a cowboy found him layin' on the road. I reckon that's how Pee Wee got his bullet. There was one gone from this hombre's gun."

"And he worked for Damon?"

"He took orders there," Doc Benson said dryly.

"I guess that's all I need to know," Lex said soberly. "You'll take care of Pee Wee no matter what happens, doc? I want him to have a regular funeral."

"He'll get one," Doc Benson promised. "How about your own? If you ride wide open into the Copper Tank, I'll be planting you along with Pee Wee."

"I wouldn't want anything better."

"That'll be good news for Damon," Doc Benson said, losing patience. "You blamed fool! Haven't you even a plan? After all, you owe it to Pee Wee not to throw your life away."

"I only know whatever happens to me, something will happen to Peck Damon first," Lex declared.

The chunky doctor shook his head resignedly.

"Well, I'm not supposed to take sides. It's your funeral not mine, but in case the information means anything, when you shove Damon's desk to one side there's a trap door under where the desk stood that he takes when he wants to get out of the Copper Tank without being seen or followed. It opens on a ladder then goes down into the canyon where he has a horse hid out an' where there's a trail he can take to come up here."

"He'd take that maybe with a sack full of money he didn't want to give up," Lex observed thoughtfully.

"How do I know what he'd take," Doc Benson said crustily. "I'll take a wagon up for Pee Wee's body an' if you're missing tomorrow I'll have the sheriff look for yours."

LEX went outside to where his horse was waiting and, mounting, rode slowly back toward the Copper Tank. He had been shocked into clear thinking once more, and as he rode, he made some plans.

He was fast with a gun, but no one gun could hope to best Damon in his own saloon and backed with all his hired guns. Still he rode direct to the hitch rack in front of the Copper Tank, and leaving his horse there, walked openly into the saloon.

There were only a few people in the dance hall and bar. Lex ignored them and walked on back into the gambling room, trailed again by the two gunnies.

Damon was at his desk and in the same position Lex had seen him before. Keeping his hands high and away from his gun, Lex stopped before the desk.

"I found out up in Paradise that was Pee Wee's own money he took out of the bank this afternoon, with you standin' at his elbow," he said.

"What money?" Damon asked.

"The money that was in the sack I threw on your desk a few hours ago," Lex explained.

"I didn't see any money," Damon grunted. "You see any, boys?"

The two men lounging in the doorway behind Lex, exchanged grins. "Naw."

"Frisco Red was found with a couple bullets in him about where he must 'a' tried to hold up Pee Wee," Lex went on. "I reckon that's where Pee Wee got his bullet."

Damon shrugged. "Frisco Red didn't work for me."

"Do I get that money now, or don't I?" demanded Lex.

"I don't even know what you're

talking about," Damon declared. "An' don't forget, I'm foreclosin' on that ranch of yours tomorrow."

"Need water, don't you," Lex commented. "Well, if I don't get the money now I can hang around, You might change your mind."

He turned and walked out to his horse. When he mounted he saw a man outside in the shadow of the saloon watching him, and as he rode up the trail toward Paradise again, he knew that he was being followed.

Without making it too obvious, he rode off the trail and dismounted in some scrub timber that was partially screened from the trail below by loose boulders. He knew that he had been watched, and that his hiding place was known. To make that certain, he rolled and lighted a cigarette before crouching down out of sight.

The riders on the trail below separated, one going on toward Paradise and the other going back toward the Copper Tank. Lex gave them time to get out of sight before he began cautiously making his way down the hillside on foot. He knew his movements would be reported to Damon and that both ends of the trail were blocked.

However, as long as his horse was left up there and he could carry out his plans, the watchers would think he was up there, too.

He moved slowly and, taking advantage of all the shadows and cover he could find, worked his way down across the trail and then blindly down into the canyon along which Copper Town was built. No one challenged him, and he managed to get to the bottom of the canyon without much difficulty.

As Doc Benson had told him, there was a narrow but well-defined horse trail which followed the dry canyon bed up toward Paradise. Dry scrub brush lined each canyon side and the rush of air coming through it and up out of the valley below made enough noise to cover the sounds of his progress as he made his way on foot toward the shacks on either side of the saloon.

NEARING the lights that marked Damon's saloon, high on the side of the canyon above him, Lex almost walked headlong into certain death.

Ahead of him a horse stamped restlessly and a man moved out of the shadows to speak sharply to it. The horse snorted and reared, evidently sensing Lex's presence. There was enough light to show one of Damon's men struggling at its head.

Lex was too close to hesitate. Clubbing his gun, he leaped forward and struck. The blow staggered the gunman, and as he fell back and reached for his gun, Lex hit him again. This time the man went down.

Working quickly, Lex tied and gagged him with his own belt and bandanna. The horse continued to rear and snort but it was tied securely and Lex wasted no time on it.

Crude steps had been cut into the side of the ravine leading up under the Copper Tank. Following them, Lex came to a rough ladder which led to the saloon floor, under what he knew to be Damon's office.

Lex crouched down at the foot of the ladder to wait. It was late and, although the Copper Tank never closed its doors, Damon would probably not be there long, especially if his men had reported that Lex was in ambush along the regular trail.

And Lex had hardly gotten his breathing back to normal when the trap door above him opened and a shaft of light blazed down. He was

Continued on page 84

GIVEN

BIKE

Nothing To Buy!

BOYS-GIRLS!

SEND NO MONEY—

Mail Coupon

Fully equipped—Balloon tires and all. NIFTY!—THIS Bike, Cash or choice of other marvelous premiums given.—SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE good size beautifully colored famous Art Pictures with our well known White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE, used for chaps, mild burns, shallow cuts. Salve easily sold to friends, relatives, and neighbors at 25c a box (with popular picture FREE). Remit and select premium as per catalog. 45th year. We are fair and square. Many customers waiting. Act Now! Mail Coupon! Salve and pictures sent postage paid. Be first—Write

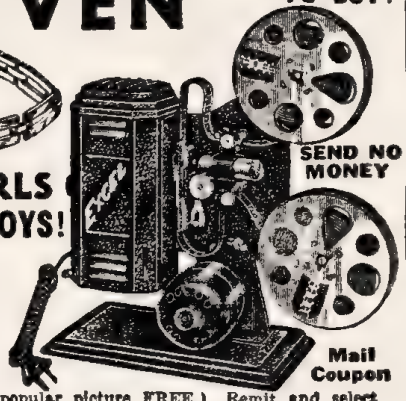
WILSON CHEM. CO., INC. Dept. BS-29, TYRONE, PA.

BOTH GIVEN

LADIES GIRLS BOYS!

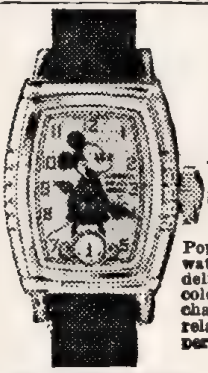
Lovely little watch about size of a dime. Has second hand not shown. A beauty! Big Movie—Adjustable lamp socket—Special bulb—Shows good size picture. A Whiz! EITHER Wrist Watch, Movie, Cash or choice of other fine premiums Given.—SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE good size beautifully colored popular art Pictures with our well known White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE used for chaps, mild burns, shallow cuts. Salve easily sold to friends, relatives, and neighbors at 25c a box (with popular picture FREE.) Remit and select premium as per catalog. 45th year. We are fair and square. Many Customers waiting. Act Now! Be first. Mail Coupon to—WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. BS-29, TYRONE, PA.

NOTHING TO BUY!



SEND NO MONEY

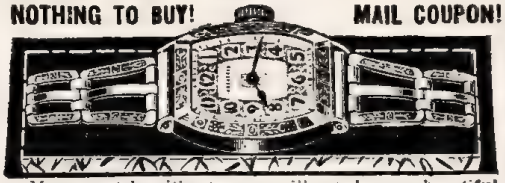
Mail Coupon



BOTH GIVEN

NOTHING TO BUY! MAIL COUPON!

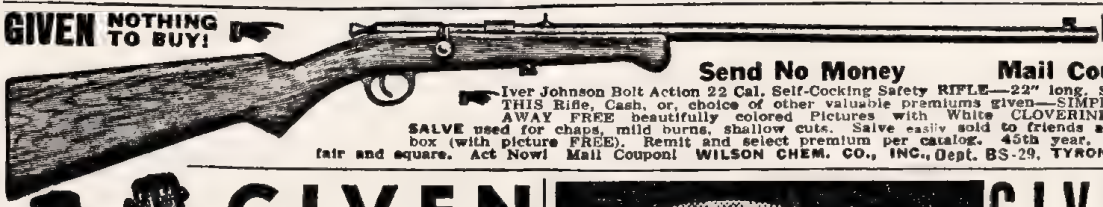
SEND NO MONEY —BOYS! GIRLS! LADIES!



Popular Mickey Mouse watch with strap or silk cord or a beautiful watch of fancy or plain design—EITHER Watch shown. Cash, or other delightful premiums given—SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautifully colored Pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE used for chaps, mild burns, shallow cuts. Salve easily sold to friends and relatives at 25c a box (with picture FREE). Remit and select premium per catalog. 45th year. We are reliable. Mail Coupon to—

WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. BS-29. TYRONE, PA.

GIVEN NOTHING TO BUY!



BOYS

Send No Money Mail Coupon!

Iver Johnson Bolt Action 22 Cal. Self-Cocking Safety RIFLE—22" long. STURDY! THIS Rifle, Cash, or, choice of other valuable premiums given—SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautifully colored Pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE used for chaps, mild burns, shallow cuts. Salve easily sold to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE). Remit and select premium per catalog. 45th year. We are fair and square. Act Now! Mail Coupon! WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. BS-29, TYRONE, PA.

Boys Girls Start Today Mail the Coupon!

GIVEN

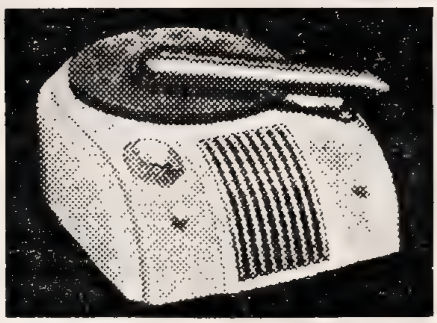
Nothing To Buy!

Send No Money—Mail Coupon!

GUITAR

Big Standard Size regulation GUITAR. It's a Dandy! THIS Guitar, Cash or choice of other valuable premiums given.—SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE good size beautifully colored famous Art Pictures with our well known White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE used for chaps, mild burns, shallow cuts. Salve easily sold to friends, relatives, and neighbors at 25c a box (with wonderful picture FREE). Remit and select premium as per catalog. 45th year. We are fair and square. Many customers waiting. Act Now! Mail Coupon! Salve and pictures sent postage paid. Be first!

WILSON CHEM. CO., INC. Dept. BS-29, TYRONE, PA.



GIVEN

Nothing To Buy!

Send No Money —Mail Coupon

RADIO PHONO-GRAPH

SEE PLAN to LEFT

GIVEN

Plays 12" record—Self-starting motor. Also produces good radio reception. See catalog for details. Other radios. GET THE NEWS! SWELL! This Radio-Phonograph, Cash or choice of other wonderful Premiums GIVEN—SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE good size beautifully colored popular Art Pictures with our well known White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE used for chaps, mild burns, shallow cuts. Salve easily sold to friends, relatives, and neighbors at 25c a box (with favorite picture FREE). Remit and select premium as per catalog. 45th year. We are reliable. Mail Coupon. WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. BS-29, TYRONE, PA.

MAIL COUPON

Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Tyrone, Pa.

Premium Division, Dept. BS-29, Date.....

Gentlemen: Please send me 12 beautiful art pictures with 12 boxes WHITE CLOVERINE Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (giving popular picture FREE). I will remit within 30 days, select a premium or keep cash commission as per catalog sent with order, postage paid.

NAME.....

RD or BOX No.....ST.....

TOWN..... STATE.....

Print Your Last Name Only in Spaces Below

WRITE, or PASTE COUPON ON A POSTAL or MAIL COUPON in an envelope NOW! Which premium do you like best?

Try White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for Chaps, Minor Burns, Shallow Cuts

ADV—6

Continued from page 82

framed in the square of light and would have been discovered if Damon had looked down. Instead the gun boss started down, bringing a lantern with him.

"Give me half an' hour an' then go up there an' smoke him out," Damon threw over his shoulder.

Voices in the office acknowledged the order and the trapdoor closed. Damon came on down the ladder breathing heavily. When he was only a few rungs from the bottom of the ladder, Lex stepped forward and stuck his gun into the man's back.

"I told you I'd wait," Lex said.

His free hand touched Damon's pocket until he found the bulky canvas sack which he had brought to the Copper Tank. He transferred it to his own pocket. Damon was hanging limply on the ladder without speaking, but as Lex started to move back, Damon suddenly kicked backward. His spur caught Lex in the stomach. Automatically Lex clutched Damon's foot and a second later they both plunged down the side of the canyon.

Lex felt a bone snap in the foot that he was holding and Damon screamed with pain. At that moment Lex lost his grip and shot on down, leaving Damon clinging to the dry brush.

A second later Damon's gun began spitting fire. Lex had lost his weapon when Damon kicked him. Plunging and scrambling on down to the bed of the canyon, Lex reached the cowboy he had tied up and disarmed. His gun was down there somewhere. Lex was feeling around for it when a yell of terror made him look up to where Damon was lodged.

The lantern, smashed in the scuffle, had set the powder-dry brush that lined the canyon on fire, and in seconds, flames were roaring up under the Copper Tank.

Lex had a momentary glimpse of Damon's stocky body starkly highlighted by flames, whirling and kicking in blazing brush that surrounded and trapped him. He slashed off the belt with which the recumbent gunman was tied and then, grabbing the horse Damon had down there waiting, rode blindly down the canyon into the wind.

The man he had knocked out before climbing the steps under the Copper Tank was not so badly damaged that he could not get up the other side of the canyon on foot. Lex heard him scrambling up through the brush.

Down where the canyon fanned out to join the valley, Lex stopped to look back again. By now the Copper Tank and all of Copper Town and the upper end of the canyon where it had stood was a flaming torch. A light springboard wagon came down the road while Lex was sitting there watching.

In the wagon were Doc Benson and his assistant. They were on their way up to the line cabin to bring down Pee Wee's body.

"Get what you went after?" Doc Benson asked. Lex nodded wearily.

"Damon dead?"

"Burned up. His own lantern set off that fire," Lex said. "He died in his own web."

"Well," Doc Benson grunted. "I don't know much about Pee Wee's religion, but it looks to me like you've sure lighted a torch for him that'll light up his last trail."

"As long as I live I'll carry one in my memory for him, too," Lex said humbly. "He'll always ride this range as long as I do."

THE END

BORDER BRAND

BY GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

When those night-riding renegades tried to tag Andy Calvert with a hot-lead brand they found he was a top hand himself with a six-gun running iron.

THE roan under Andy Calvert stumbled with weariness, deepening the frown on his rider's face. Andy had to have a fresh horse for the getaway after the job ahead. But he had no money and on the trail he'd been riding people hadn't taken kindly to a man stamped with prison pallor.

Andy pulled up to scan his back trail. He saw nothing as he had seen nothing for four days, since he'd been released from Yuma Prison, and it puzzled him. He'd been sentenced to five years, yet he'd been freed after serving only two. His sentence couldn't have been shortened that much for just good behavior.

Andy had been sent to prison with two other members of the Morgan gang after the holdup of a Tombstone bank. He himself hadn't taken part in that holdup but he'd been jailed with the other two men caught. When he was released Andy figured it was for a purpose—to lead the law to the money cached after that robbery, perhaps—but

strangely he wasn't being followed.

He shrugged and pushed his tired mount ahead. He was certain the law would pick up his trail somewhere but if they'd just give him a little more time they'd really have something to go after him for. Andy hadn't had any part in that Tombstone job but now he meant to pull one of his own. He was in Apache Basin and not far ahead was the cow town of Oro Grande. The town had no bank and Andy had the low-down on the whole situation.

Jed Burkhard, who owned the town's general store, took his week's proceeds to Globe every Friday to bank it. He always rode the mid-afternoon train and it was Andy's plan to board the same train, to hold Burkhard up, take his money, and jump off the train as it slowed near Gila Narrows. At the Narrows Andy would have his horse staked out and from there it would be an easy jump across the Mexican border. This Friday Burkhard would be carrying an extra amount of cash received for the sale of some fine Herefords he had imported.

"With the money," Andy reflected, "I'll come back after awhile and settle down in Texas. Under a new name I can buy lands and horses and forget the past. I'll be just a cowman who's always honest—sometimes."

The horse stumbled again and jerked Andy out of his reverie. He *had* to have a fresh mount. After several days' hard run to throw off possible pursuit, the roan would be in no shape for a fast getaway inside of a week. That would be too late.

Andy slowly rode on, trying to figure a way out of his predicament, until finally he came to the home spread of the Box L outfit. Warily he turned off the trail and made his way to the water troughs beside the corrals. The big corrals were full of cattle and men were busy branding.

It was a homey, attractive spread, and Andy stared around with a kind of homesick longing in his hard gray eyes. Giant old cottonwoods shaded a sprawling ranchhouse fronted on three sides by cool porches overgrown with flowering vines. The bunkhouse looked just as comfortable—as though the boss was concerned about the well-being of his hands.

"Light down, stranger," a young fellow sitting on the corral rail said to Andy. "Dinner bell's goin' to ring in a minute."

Andy refused, saying, "Thanks just the same." He had no reason for refusing; it was born of a habit of caution of a hombre who's long been on the dodge. "Got to get to Oro Grande in a hurry."

The young fellow was stockily built, had frank blue eyes and a generous mouth. He eyed Andy's jaded roan.

"That bronc of yours looks like he'd stumble over a piece of string," he said. "Turn him into the corral. I'll get you a Box L horse that'll take you to Oro Grande a sight faster."

Without waiting for an answer, the young fellow walked over to a bunch of saddled broncs standing tied to the ground and came back with a sleek, rangy buckskin.

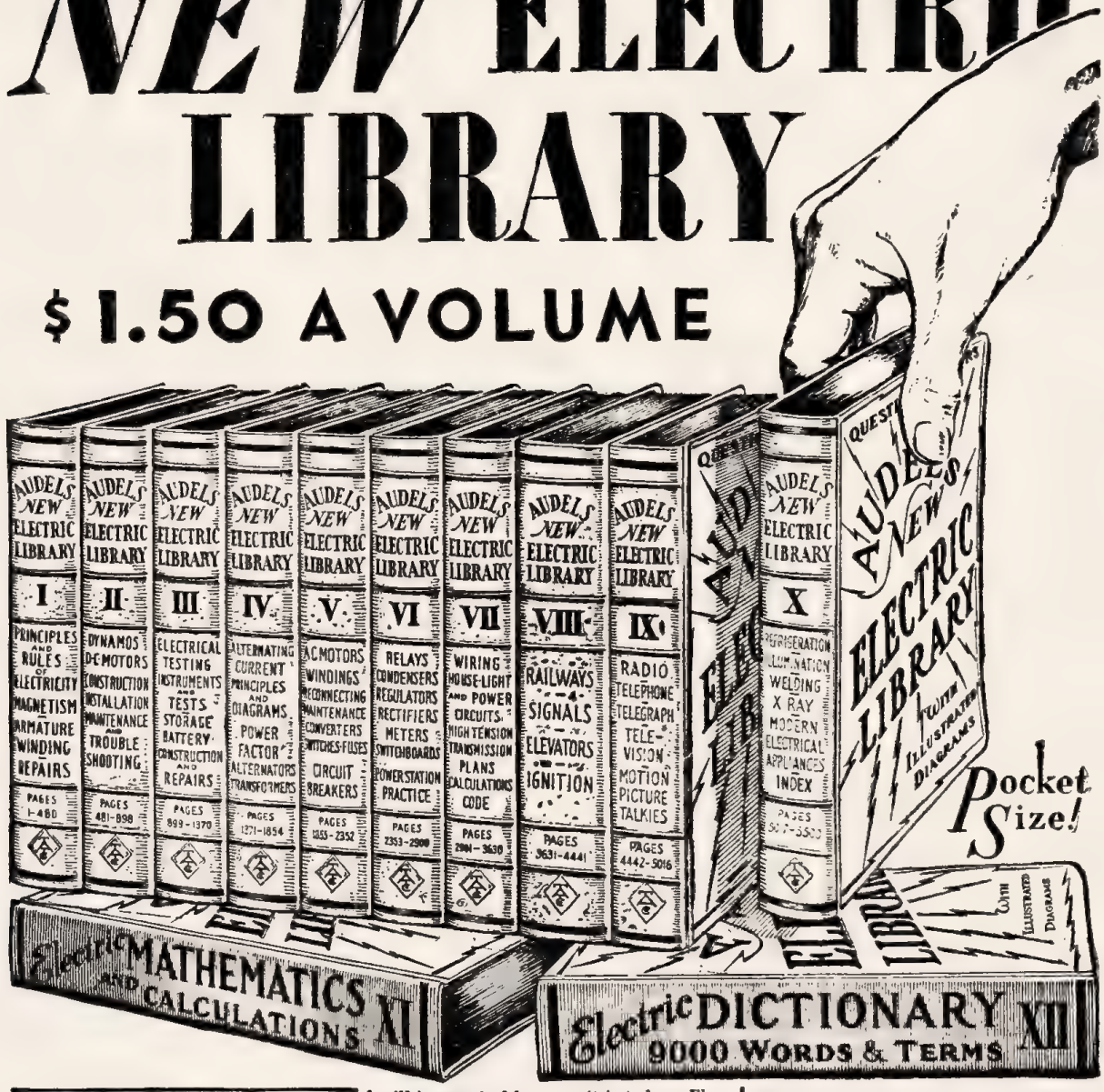
"When you get to town, just throw the reins back over Chappo's head, and he'll come home," he grinned. "Next time you're back this way you can pick up your own bronc."

It was a trifle, really; a commonplace of neighborly give-and-take. But Andy Calvert stared at the buckskin. He knew horses. The buckskin had speed and endurance and, to judge from the clean intelli-

Continued on page 88

NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY

$1.50 A VOLUME


AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY I
PRINCIPLES AND RULES OF ELECTRICITY MAGNETISM ARMATURE WINDING REPAIRS
PAGES 1-480
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY II
DYNAMOS DC MOTORS CONSTRUCTION INSTALLATION MAINTENANCE TROUBLE SHOOTING
PAGES 481-898
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY III
ELECTRICAL TESTING INSTRUMENTS TESTS STORAGE BATTERY CONSTRUCTION AND REPAIRS
PAGES 899-1370
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY IV
ALTERNATING CURRENT PRINCIPLES AND DIAGRAMS POWER FACTOR ALTERNATORS TRANSFORMERS
PAGES 1371-1854
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY V
AC MOTORS WINDINGS RECONNECTING MAINTENANCE CONVERTERS SWITCHES FUSES CIRCUIT BREAKERS
PAGES 1855-2352
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY VI
RELAYS CONDENSERS REGULATORS RECTIFIERS METERS SWITCHBOARDS POWER STATION PRACTICE
PAGES 2353-2900
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY VII
WIRING HOUSE-LIGHT AND POWER CIRCUITS HIGH TENSION TRANSMISSION PLANS CALCULATIONS CODE
PAGES 2901-3630
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY VIII
RAILWAYS SIGNALS ELEVATORS IGNITION
PAGES 3631-4441
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY IX
RADIO TELEPHONE TELEGRAPH TELEVISION MOTION PICTURE TALKIES
PAGES 4442-5016
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY X
REFRIGERATION ILLUMINATION WELDING X RAY MODERN ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES INDEX
PAGES 5017-5500
AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY
With Illustrated Diagrams
Electric MATHEMATICS AND CALCULATIONS XI
Electric DICTIONARY XII
9000 WORDS & TERMS
Pocket Size!

AUDELS NEW ELECTRIC LIBRARY

THE 12 volumes are now complete with 7,200 pages—9,500 illustrations—gold titles—red edges—flexible covers—pocket size—5½x6 inches—sold separately—at $1.50 a volume postpaid—money back if not pleased.

THIS IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY

EVERY electrician, every engineer, every mechanic, every student, should know about these new helpful books, which give in plain words, including questions and answers, a complete working knowledge of electrical engineering in all phases.

HOME STUDY BOOKS

AUDELS New Electric Library is arranged as a progressive home study course in Electricity. It will give anyone who will devote 15 to 30 minutes a day to its study, a scientific and working knowledge of Electricity in all branches. Written in plain language, the clear illustrations are easy to understand. They make study and learning a pleasure.

VALUABLE REFERENCE BOOKS

YOU ask the questions—Audels New Electric Library will give you the answer. You will be surprised how easy it is to learn Electricity the Audel way. The 9,500 simplified outline cuts and graphic pictures are concise explanations of the theories and applications of applied Electricity with useful information relating to the construction, operation and maintenance of machines.

EASY TO READ FOR PROFIT

THESE books are helping thousands of men by giving them a broader view of the whole field of Electricity, without which a man is often handicapped. Send for a single volume, any one of the Series, at our risk.

AUDELS BOOK A MONTH PLAN

THE first book is sent to you on 7 days' free trial. If you find it will help, send the price; if not mail it back. The second book is sent on receipt of payment for first book and we allow you 30 days to pay for each following book. Following numbers are mailed after payments have been received until you have completed the Series. If not satisfied, you may cancel your subscription at any time. Mail order to-day and you will have taken your first step on the Road to Success.

THEO. AUDEL & CO., 49 W. 23RD ST., NEW YORK CITY

MAIL EXAMINATION COUPON

Theo. Audel & Co., 49 W. 23rd St.
New York City, N. Y.

Please enter my subscription for Audels New Electric Library. Price $1.50 a volume. Mail one volume each month, for which I will remit $1.50 promptly after arrival. Start my subscription with Volume ____

.....
Name

.....
Address

.....
Occupation

.....
Employed by

S. S.

Continued from page 86

gent look of his head, probably had the savvy to be a fine cutting horse. A fine cutting horse was worth up to a thousand dollars of any cowman's money.

The young fellow chuckled, misinterpreting the other's hesitance. "Don't worry. I'll write you a note so nobody'll grab you as a horse thief." As he scribbled on a piece of paper, he said, "I'm Northrup, foreman here."

"My name's Calvert," Andy said. "I'm a heap obliged to you."

THE buckskin evidently hadn't had the kinks ridden out of him since he'd been roped up, for he lunged into savage bucking when Andy swung aboard. It suited Andy's mood. He suddenly raked the bronc with spurs and smacked him over the ears with his hat and yipped. The buckskin responded as if Andy had lit a fuse under him. Sunfishing, swapping ends in midair, arching and plunging like a bouncing comet, Chappo went through his repertory of widowmakers.

Andy rode him. Andy stuck him, in time and in tune, letting no daylight show under his seat. It was fierce bucking and fine riding. The Box L hands quit work to watch and whooped applause.

"That's ridin' 'im, hombre!" a waddy yelled.

Andy reddened. Here he was showing off like a nester's kid with a little red wagon. He didn't look back as Chappo quit bucking, but reined the buckskin toward the road. And he sat very straight in the saddle, something warm and singing within him.

South of the Box L he left the road and angled southeast. At Gila Narrows he meant to hide the horse in the brush, in preparation for his getaway. He would walk from the Narrows into Oro Grande.

He suddenly felt in his pocket, remembering another chore he planned to do. Relieved, he found the letter he'd written was still in the inner pocket of his vest.

Lafe Morgan had got word to Andy while he was still in prison that on his release Andy should come straight to him. Morgan headed the band of renegades who operated back and forth across the Mexican-Arizona border. Horses they stole in Mexico, they sold in Arizona; and cattle they stole in Arizona, they sold in Mexico. Andy had written a letter to Morgan, accepting the offer and promising to come join him. But Andy hadn't addressed and mailed the message. He had hesitated at the knowledge that once he joined Morgan's gang again, he would be a thief and a crook for keeps. He didn't want that. If he could pull off one more job single-handed, then he could go to a new country and start all over.

Abruptly Andy reined in his horse. He was riding over Box L range now, along a drift fence stretched to keep cattle out of a shallow creek that was probably full of quicksand and that was bordered with loco weed. Wires of this drift fence were down, either cut or broken, and cattle were already in the loco weed.

Impulsively Andy hoorawed the blaze-faces out of the patch of larkspur. He knotted the wire strands together again. No use letting Box L critters die because some line rider had overlooked a broken fence.

A few miles farther on, Andy found a seep which had been enclosed with an earthen wall to make a waterhole. Cattle had tramped down part of the wall and water was leaking out fast.

"What in blazes has happened to their line riders!" Andy growled. "Looks like they've all gone to town to spark the schoolma'am."

It took him longer to repair the waterhole than he figured. The sun was slanting westward when he swung into saddle again. Then when he saw a horse ahead of him, a little farther on, he decided to ride on and put a bug in a line rider's ear.

But the rider wasn't anywhere near the saddled horse. Moreover, the bronc's reins weren't dangling but were back over the mount's neck, and the horse was spooky—it lunged away as Andy approached. Andy's buckskin, however, overhauled the sorrel like a cougar overhauling a calf.

"Guess that line rider was left afoot," Andy reflected.

He back-trailed the riderless horse, intending to take the horse back to the waddy and kid him about getting tossed tail over tincup like a tenderfoot.

Andy found the spot where the line rider had been thrown. But as he studied the signs in the dust, Andy whistled tunelessly in consternation. The waddy had been hurt. He had crawled away on hands and knees. Splotches in the dust looked like blood.

"Maybe the saddlehorn caught 'im in the middle," Andy thought.

The trail led to a little line camp, a lean-to beside a pole corral in a cottonwood bosque along the dry creek.

"Hello!" Andy shouted. Dismounting, he stalked into the lean-to. It was dark inside, and at first he couldn't see.

But a man sighed and a trigger snicked softly as it was eased down. A man said, "Mister, I damn near shot you. Just in time I saw your horse and realized you're a Box L man. Bring me a drink from the spring behind the shack, will you?"

Andy did so. When he got back with the cup of water, he struck a match. When the light flared, he saw that the young waddy was lying on a blanket on the floor. Blood was splotched across the front of his shirt.

"Hey, douse that light!" he warned, his voice hoarse and gasping.

He was badly hurt, Andy realized. He said, "What happened, bud?"

"Ride back to the ranch," the hurt man whispered. "Tell 'em there's trouble."

"But what's wrong?"

"Don't know. I was drygulched. Tell Northrup—my brother."

"Let me tie up your hurt," Andy said.

The waddy started to say something but didn't quite get it out. Bending over him, Andy realized that the youngster was slumping into unconsciousness, and might never come out of it. Andy struck another match to look at the puncher's hurts.

Cra-a-ack! Outside in the deepening dusk, a rifle barked. A bullet slammed through the open doorway, whispering past Andy's head and thudding into the wall beyond.

Instantly Andy put out the match. Pulse hammering, he realized that whoever had shot this Box L waddy was shooting at him, too. He was being taken for a Box L man!

WORKING in the dark, Andy put a tight bandage on the senseless man's chest. Whether the lad had any chance for recovery or not, Andy couldn't say. By the time he finished, it was dark outside. Andy's buckskin stood by the water trough, lipping the remnants of oats in a feed box there.

Andy crawled out of the cabin and

on to the side of the horse. Then with one motion, he leaped into the saddle and spurred away in a wild run. A rifle spurted flame behind him but the shot whipped over his head. A second shot went wild and then the gunman quit wasting lead.

Andy didn't head back toward the Box L to take word of the trouble as that hurt waddy had asked. "I'll mind my own business," Andy told himself. He was no Box L man.

Just the same it made him angry to think of that hurt line rider. Somebody had drygulched him. Why? The rider hadn't been able to think of a reason for it. But Andy could. "Some hombres are planning to steal Box L cattle off this range," he muttered. "They ambushed that line rider so he wouldn't see 'em at work tonight."

The Box L ought to be warned. Besides, the sooner that wounded line rider got a doctor's care, the better his chance of living. Abruptly Andy reined up. He listened a moment for sound of pursuit but heard none.

There was an area of tall dry grass by the creek bank and some piled up driftwood, tinder-dry from the sun. It would make a blaze, Andy figured. A blaze big enough to be sighted from the home ranch. Box L men would come riding to see how-come. Any rustlers at work would have trouble avalanche onto their necks.

Andy dismounted, bent, and set fire to the dry grass. Chuckling, he straightened up—and a spurt of powder flame lashed out of the darkness behind him, and the star-lit sky seemed to reel down. Andy hit the ground hard. Almost instantly a second shot followed and the buckskin snorted and whirled away, as if wounded or creased.

Dazedly Andy realized that he'd been followed by that drygulcher who'd taken him for a Box L man. The fire he had set was blazing up. Andy realized he was lying in the full glare of the blaze. Setting his teeth against the agony of his broken shoulder, he hunched onto his knees and crawled into a thicket of sumac and toyon fringing the creek bed.

But it wasn't one man, it was two hombres who came up cautiously, guns leveled, hunting for him. He scrouged deeper into the thicket and with his unhurt right hand drew his six-gun.

"Let's put out this damn fire!" the first man growled.

"We got to find that Box L waddy," the other answered.

"I drilled 'im plumb center."

"Sure. Only why ain't he lyin' here dead? You couldn't hit a mud wallow with a club if you was lyin' in the middle of it!"

They searched around, while the fire blazed up in a war dance of flame. One of the gunmen grumbled, "The boss'll skin us alive if he notices this fire."

"I'm worryin' about more'n the boss!" his partner said. "I don't mind pickin' Lady Luck's pocket but spittin' in her eye is somethin' else again."

Scooping sand onto the fire, they worked like beavers with burrs under their tails. From his hiding place Andy swore at his luck. If only he had never stopped at the Box L! Now he was afoot with a busted shoulder, hiding from men who'd shoot him on sight. Lord, he'd have to wait months before he could pull off the holdup he had planned so long! Hurt and broke, what would he live on until he got into shape again? Though, of course, that wouldn't be a problem if these gunmen whipped some slugs into him. A sure cure for hunger pangs was a lead teething

Continued on page 92

THE VOW OF SILENCE IS BROKEN !

THE 7 KEYS TO POWER TEACHES YOU ALL THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE from the cradle to the grave—and beyond. It tells you the particular day and hour to do anything you desire, whether it be to the light of the moon, sun, or in total darkness, in accordance with Ancient Teachings. We make no claims ourselves, but the author, Lewis de Claremont, says: "The power to get what you want revealed at last, for the first time since the dawn of creation. The very same power which the ancient Chaldeans, Cuthic Priests, Egyptians, Babylonians and Sumerians used is at our disposal today." He says: "Follow the simple directions and you can do anything you desire. No one can tell how these master forces are used without knowing about this book, but WITH IT YOU CAN MOLD ANYONE TO YOUR WILL."

"From this book," he claims, "you can learn the arts of an old science as practiced by the priestly orders. Their marvels were almost beyond belief. You, too, can learn to do them all with the instructions written in this Book. It would be a shame if these things could all be yours and you failed to grasp them, or were to be blinded by past failures. Don't confuse this book with any other book having a similar name. There is no other book like this one, although many people have tried to imitate it." He says, "It is every man's birthright to have these things of life: MONEY! GOOD HEALTH! HAPPINESS! If you lack any of these three great necessities of life, then this book has an important message for you. No matter what you need, there exists a spiritual power which is abundantly able to bring you whatever things you need. In it you can find the way to all power, the way to GET ANYTHING YOU WANT

"The SEVEN KEYS TO POWER contains the secret of all real success and REVEALS THINGS YOU NEVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE. Its great author LEWIS De CLAREMONT has a rare gift which comes only to a few, showing things as they should be in their true light. NEVER FAILS TO BRING RESULTS."

OVERCOME ALL ENEMIES ! ! OBSTACLES & HIDDEN FEARS!

IF YOU ARE CROSSED IN ANY WAY THE SEVEN KEYS TO POWER SHOWS HOW TO REMOVE AND CAST IT BACK!

THE BOOK PURPORTS TO TELL YOU HOW TO—

- Gain the love of the opposite sex
- Unite people for marriage
- Obtain property
- Make people do your bidding
- Make any person love you, no matter who
- Get any job you want
- Make anyone lucky in any games
- Cast a spell on anyone, no matter where they are
- Get people out of law suits, courts.
- Banish all misery
- Bring happiness to broken lives
- Know what others are doing
- Gain the mastery of all things
- Bring happiness to broken homes
- Remove the source of unhappiness
- Choose your words according to ancient, holy methods
- Chant your desires in the silent tongue

THE ONLY TRUE BOOK OF MASTERSHIP

This is said by the author to be the book from which the old masters gained their knowledge and power and from which they sold limited portions to certain favored Kings, Priests and others at high prices, but never to be revealed under a vow, the violation of which entailed severe punishment.

This book, he claims, shows you the secrets of old which when properly applied makes you able to control the will of all without their knowing it. If you have a problem and you wish to solve it, don't hesitate. Advertisements cannot describe nor do this wonderful book justice. You must read it and digest its meaning to really appreciate its worth.

Guaranteed to Satisfy or Money Refunded

Only a limited number available for sale, so don't wait. It is worth many times its weight in gold. If you are wise, you will rush your order for this book NOW.

This Coupon is worth $1.00 to You.

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW !

MAIL AT ONCE

SUCCESS BOOK CO.
Dept. S-2
30 Park Row
Stamford, Conn.

ONLY $1.00

SEND NO MONEY

When Postman delivers your Book deposit with him $1.00 plus a few pennies only for Ten days—if satisfied keep the Book—if not return it and your deposit will be refunded in full no questions asked.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

P. S. We will be glad to ship your order on approval — But if you wish to enclose a dollar bill or Money Order we will also send you a Genuine MYSTIC POWER Coin of Luck Absolutely FREE!

Amazing new way to KEEP YOUR HANDS CLEAN wherever you go..

Handy Soap Tissue

[*Every leaf of this tiny book (2 by 3 inches) is a tissue of pure, unscented soap*]

Tuck it into handbag, purse, pocketbook, pocket, traveling bag or glove compartment of car. A godsend for weekends, camping, picnics, motor trips—or for office workers and salesmen. Men or women who hesitate to use soap in public washstands can now have their individual paper-thin soap always available.

Each soap tissue disintegrates when rubbed between wet hands, making a soft, creamy, luxurious lather which thoroughly cleanses the hands (or face) and does not leave a disagreeable odor.

Be the first to get this sensational convenience for yourself, sweetheart, wife or husband. If unable to obtain at department, drug or chain store, send 25 cents in coin for book of 50 tissues to

HANDY SOAP TISSUE CO.
236 W. 55th St., New York, N. Y.

New! Lifelike!

PHOTO-RINGS

NEWEST SENSATION! Send any snapshot or photo and we'll reproduce it in this beautiful onyx-like ring.

Special **48c**

Indestructible! Waterproof! (Hand-painted 10c extra)

Enclose strip of paper for ring size. Pay postman plus a few cents postage. If you send cash we pay postage. REX PHOTO RING CO., Dept. SS-4 P.O. Box 14, Cincinnati, O. (Canadians Send Money Orders)

Continued from page 90

ring delivered out of the front end of a Colt .45.

The two gunmen had the fire put out. One of them swore suddenly.

"Here comes the herd! Damn, they're moving fast!"

Andy, flattened against the ground, heard then the low thump and rumble of many hoofbeats. The two gunmen strode off to the horses they had left tied to the ground, vaulted into saddle, and rode away.

Andy stood up. At first the ground seemed to reel under his feet. But he gritted his teeth and kept on his feet. With his bandanna he made a sling for his left arm. Then he started walking. He headed southward, intending to angle toward Oro Grande.

But sound of that herd of beef cattle grew louder, and presently he realized that he was walking straight to meet it. Off to his right was an outcropping of sandstone and a pile of boulders. Andy hid himself among them. Soon the herd pushed into view. There was enough moonlight for him to estimate that four hundred animals were in the bunch.

"That's funny," he thought suddenly, as he watched the men hazing the critters along. "They ain't driving those animals off the Box L range. They're drivin' 'em *onto* Northrup's grass. Not stealing beef, but giving a fine herd to the Box L!"

THE herd was stopped and the men gathered together. Matches flared and cigarettes were lit as they started a powwow.

"This is far enough," a deep voice rumbled.

"What do we do now?"

Andy darted a little closer to hear better. He saw two things, then, which further puzzled him. These cattle wore Box L brands, and vent brands. And three of the ten men were Indians—Apaches, who wore

badges on their vests. Reservation police!

"We'll leave the cattle here," one man was saying. He was a big, burly hombre with a deep-lined face. Judging from the worried, bossy tone of his voice, he was running this outfit.

"Then what?"

"We go on to the Box L. We work fast. Remember, men, we've got to avalanche onto their necks 'fore they know what's up!"

"Who all goes? Everybody?"

"No," said the boss. "All right, Hanley."

As if that were a signal, the men moved into action.

Andy Calvert gasped an oath of stunned, unbelieving shock at what happened. Those seven white men turned on the three Apache reservation police and cold-bloodedly, utterly without warning, shot them out of their saddles and emptied their pistols into them as they crumpled to the ground.

"Good enough," the boss snapped presently. "Let's go on. Bear in mind, Northrup has got to be killed."

"I say shoot the whole outfit!" a rider snarled.

"It won't be necessary. With three or four Box L men dead, the rest'll pile out of the country. Any of them that stay will be grabbed by the United States marshal in the morning. Come on!"

The outfit spurred away, headed for the Box L. One of the fallen Apaches stirred and moaned. Quickly Andy went to his side and bent over him. Andy had some idea of helping the man but saw that the Indian was so shot up he wouldn't last long.

"What's it all about, amigo?" Andy asked. "Who're those white men?"

"Boss—him Apache agent."

"What were you all doing with those cattle?"

"Agent buy um."

"Bought 'em! Then why was he driving the critters back onto the Box L range?"

But the Apache began to mumble something in his own tongue, his voice gasping and choking as he lost consciousness. Andy thought hard. And as he put two and two together, a towering fury flared within him.

Like too many of the white men placed in authority over Indian reservations, this Apache agent was a crook. He had bought Box L cattle for beef to pass out as rations to the Indians under his charge. But he had been stealing this very beef he bought officially for the Apaches and selling the beef secretly and cheaply to crooked whites, and lining his own pockets with the cash.

The Apaches, cheated of their beef, had probably grumbled. An investigation had been scheduled. So the Apache agent got busy to save himself by turning suspicion elsewhere—by framing the Box L!

His story would probably be that three reservation policemen had discovered Box L men driving beef bought for the Indians back onto the Box L range! Stealing back the very cattle they had just sold! The Box L men had had a fight with these reservation police and killed them, the agent would say. Whereupon, the agent had rounded up a group of men and ridden to the Box L to arrest the thieving Box L killers. In the resulting fight, the story would go, the agent's men had had to kill various Box L riders. And the surviving Box L men would be arrested and tried as murdering rustlers! It was a slick, ruthless scheme.

"But damned if I'm going to let it work!" Andy grated.

He caught one of the dead

Apaches' horses, pulled himself into saddle, and galloped after the agent's outfit. Riding hard made his wounded shoulder begin to bleed. Giddiness assailed him and he had to hold himself in the saddle.

Ahead a group of buttes clustered on the basin floor like bulging dents in the bottom of a dishpan. The trail to the Box L led around the buttes and the agent's men were riding that way.

"I got to get ahead of them," Andy muttered, "to reach the Box L in time to warn Northrup."

He took a shortcut. He reined his bronc *into* the cluster of buttes, sent the horse buck-jumping recklessly up a narrow ravine, over a ridge, down a steep slope into a boulder wash winding between the buttes. He came out on the far side of the buttes and hit the trail to the Box L just as the agent and his men came riding around the bend to the south.

Andy had got ahead of the range crooks—but not far enough ahead! They saw him in the dim light. And as he spurred his horse up-trail, they started in pursuit.

"*Get that hombre!*" the agent yelled.

Guns blasted out behind Andy. A slug hissed past his head and another tugged at his belt. Abruptly his horse crashed headlong, hit by a bullet, catapulting Andy from the saddle. He landed with dazing force but twisted so as to take the jar in a rolling fall. Quickly, he flung himself into the cover of a thick clump of scrub oak.

The thieves came pounding on. Their .45s lanced fire into the brush as they probed for him with bullets. Flat on his stomach, Andy waited, gathering strength for a supreme effort. And when the men quit shooting and reined up, peering into the brush for him, he sprang up. He leaped at the nearest man, swung his gun, caught the rider alongside the temple with a blow that tumbled him from the saddle. And from back of that man's horse Andy opened fire, whipping lead from his gun as fast as he could trigger it.

A man crumpled to his first shot, and his second shot doubled the burly Indian agent over his saddle-horn. But the thieves were shooting back—a slug hit the horse Andy crouched behind and sent the animal rearing and plunging away. Unprotected then, Andy stood there swapping lead with the thieves.

His bullets knocked another hombre slumping off his mount but a slug tore like a jagged sword through Andy's side and another smashed into his thigh. Andy's knees began to buckle. As he fell, he twisted and flung himself head-first into the brush. Another slug creased his hip. Bullets tore through the leafy cover about him, thudding into the ground, one tearing through the calf of his leg and another slashing along his ribs. From all sides the gunmen savagely emptied their weapons into the greasewood clump. Then they began to shout to one another.

"Let's trample 'im!"

"Naw, we've blowed 'im all to pieces. Lend a hand with the boss."

"Mike, you all right, boy? Sit up—"

"Got me in the lungs. I'm . . . ch-chokin' blood—"

"Boys, I'm hurt bad. You got to get me to a doctor."

"Sure, boss. Right easy, now. Hey, Joe! Lend a hand!"

"Pete's dead. Damn that—"

"Blast it, quit shootin' off your mouth and lend a hand!"

Vaguely Andy was aware of the unwounded range crooks helping their hurt waddies onto horses, of

the outfit moving off again. Not toward the Box L but toward the south. Andy tried to get onto hands and knees. He had some idea of crawling up-trail for help. But he had no strength. Abruptly he slumped flat and oblivion rolled over and engulfed him.

WHEN Andy was aware of things about him again, he discovered he was lying on a cot in a house. Two men were talking beside him.

"Think he'll live, doc?"

"No tellin', Northrup. He's shot to pieces. Better notify his people."

"Don't know anything about him. We found him lyin' on the trail early this morning. He's got some private papers on him but I don't like to open 'em. If he dies, of course, I'll have to. Poor fellow."

Heavy footsteps sounded as another man entered the room.

"Who's this man, Northrup?" a bossy voice demanded. "I've told you I won't have drifters ridin' grubline on this ranch. Now you're makin' a free hospital of it."

"He's no floater, Mr. Mellitt," Northrup said mildly. "He's workin' for the Box L." Northrup evidently was as kindly a man as his boss was tight-fisted.

Lying there in pain, after the men walked out, Andy thought wryly that if he died now that letter he'd had in his pocket—that letter to Lafe Morgan which he had delayed addressing and mailing—would reveal him as an ex-convict and a thief. While if he lived and the letter was *not* opened, and he told how he had fought those range thieves, he would be hailed as a friend and partner by the Box L. Thinking of it, Andy realized that how a man wound up his life could depend on some trifle of circumstance. Whether he died among friends who respected him

Men with tough beards—tender skin!
Use these new Thin Gillettes—and grin!
You look well-groomed—shave in a flash.
At four for ten you save real cash!
SAVINGS
Top quality at rock-bottom price
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
Gillette
4 for 10c
8 for 19c
The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

FACTORY-TO-YOU
Save up to 50%
EASY TERMS

30 DAYS TRIAL
PUT THIS 1941 CHASSIS IN YOUR OWN CABINET
14-TUBES
AMAZING FOREIGN RECEPTION
$19.95 COMPLETE WITH TUBES AND SPEAKER
Frequency Modulation and Television Provision
NOW, you can enjoy the mighty power of a 14-tube 1941 radio at the amazingly low factory-to-you price of $19.95. Brilliant performance—beautiful tone. Now, tune in broadcasts direct from distant overseas stations.
SEE MIDWEST'S ANSWER TO TRADE-INS!
Big 1941 catalog shows how to buy at wholesale price . . . direct from factory. Read about sensational-new 14-tube cabinet model at $29.95. Also other chassis and cabinet models from 5 to 17-tubes . . . up to 5 wave bands . . . including Radio-phonograph-combinations and Home Recorder.
FREE RADIO CATALOG
SEND 1¢ POST CARD FOR FREE 1941 CATALOG NOW!
USER-AGENTS Make Extra Money!
MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
DEPT. 43-AA CINCINNATI, OHIO

ANY BOOK IN PRINT!
Thousands of Books—Many 1/2 Price and less
Delivered at your door. We pay postage. Standard authors, new books, popular editions, fiction, reference, medical, mechanical, children's books, etc.—All at guaranteed savings. Send card now for CLARKSON'S 1941 Catalog.
FREE Write for our great illustrated book catalog. A short course in literature. The buying guide of 300,000 book lovers. The answer to your Christmas gift problem. Free if you write NOW—TODAY!
CLARKSON PUBLISHING COMPANY
Dept. BS40—1253 So. Wabash Ave. Chicago, Ill.

MAKE MORE MONEY
Taking Orders For The NIMROD Line
Earn more every day in the year representing old established firm with a complete line of fast selling necessities: Shirts, Ties, Underwear, Hosiery, Pajamas, Raincoats, Sweaters, Jackets, Campus Coats, Pants, Belts, Breeches, Shoes, Coveralls, Shop Coats, Uniforms, etc. Every item guaranteed. Experience unnecessary.
Write quick for FREE SALES EQUIPMENT
NIMROD COMPANY,
4922-BN Lincoln Ave., Chicago, Ill.

WANT A U. S. GOVERNMENT JOB?
START
$1260 to $2100 Year
Thousands of appointments every year. Get ready immediately. Men—Women. Mail Coupon today sure.
COUPON
FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. J194, Rochester, N. Y.
Sirs: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government jobs. (2) Tell me how to qualify for one of these jobs.
Name .....
Address .....

or ended up like a slinker wolf, would depend on some two-cent accident of fate.

He dozed off. Sometime later angry voices in the next room wakened him.

"I'm Deputy United States Marshal O'Ryan from Globe."

"I'm Northrup, foreman here. What's your business, marshal?"

"I'm placing you under arrest, Northrup. And every man in your employ. I have ten men with me so don't make trouble."

"That's—kind of sudden, marshal," Northrup grated. "Mind explainin' how-come?"

"Don't stall, Northrup! Last night your men stole cattle off the Apache reservation and battled reservation police."

"Last night," Northrup retorted, "all but one of my men stayed right here at the ranch. We didn't steal and we didn't fight!"

"That fight you *didn't* take part in," the marshal snapped, "resulted in three dead Apache police and two white clerks, and the wounding of Agent Callahan and couple more white men. They've sworn out warrants for you, Northrup. Now don't make a fool of yourself by telling such an obvious lie as that you didn't leave the ranch!"

"But it's not a lie, marshal."

"So you're going to be stubborn. Look here, you got any wounded men on this place?"

"Yes. One man."

"Bullets in him?"

"Yes, but—" Northrup shut up.

"Maybe he shot himself falling off his horse!" the marshal snapped. "Northrup, Callahan positively identified you!"

But Callahan lied, Andy wanted to yell. He shouted, "Northrup!" but his yell was just a gasping whisper, and the effort sent tearing agony through him. That bullet in the side had ripped his lung. He tried to get

up then, to go into the next room and tell what he knew. But the effort slumped him back on the pillow in reeling nausea, and for a minute his senses blacked out. Recovering a little, he pondered what to do. Even if he could talk, would his word be taken against that of Agent Callahan? After all, he was Andy Calvert, ex-convict.

He looked around. On a chair beside his cot were his clothes. With effort that popped cold sweat out on his forehead, he reached to his vest and got hold of that letter he intended for Lafe Morgan.

On a table beside the cot were pen and ink. Northrup evidently used this room as a sort of office. Andy got hold of the pen. Carefully, with effort that took every bit of his waning strength, he wrote words on the envelope, fighting to keep his fingers steady. Finished, he laid the pen down and slumped back.

THE door opened and Northrup and the burly marshal entered.

"You denying this man got shot fighting reservation police last night?" the marshal was demanding.

"No, but . . . but I've got to deny that he's a Box L man. He's just a drifter I loaned a horse to. I don't even know his name."

"Damn flimsy story. Any proof of who he is?"

"He's got some papers on 'im. Maybe they tell."

They moved toward Andy's bed. Andy lay still, eyes shut.

"Say, look here! A letter. Addressed to—" The marshal's voice hollowed with surprise. "It's addressed to Callahan, the Indian agent! What the devil!"

He ripped the envelope, unfolded paper, and read aloud:

"Amigo, it was good to get word from you. I was released from prison just this morning and I'm writing to say I'll be glad to join up with you again. As a matter of fact I'm riding south at once—maybe I'll get to you before this letter does.

"Now as to plans. I agree with you that your outfit is a good cover for operations so long as nobody squawks. But I think you're running unnecessary risks. I say drive cattle south, yes. The stock is good and we get cash money. But to hell with coming back with horses. The Mexicans we steal horses from won't buy the cattle we drive across the border, so we lose possible customers. Even if they aren't sure we robbed them of horses, they'll suspect. I say for our men to scatter and come back over the line singly. That's safer than driving horses back. However, we'll settle details when I see you.

Hasta luego,

ANDY CALVERT."

The burly marshal stared at Andy.

"So this hombre is one of the thieves!"

"And Agent Callahan is leader of the outfit," Foreman Northrup snapped. "Maybe you're being tricked by him, marshal!"

"But if Callahan *is* crooked, who shot him?"

"Maybe the agent and some of his white cronies were stealing reservation beef and the Apache police battled 'em."

"By thunder, you may be right! I'll go question Callahan. But meantime, Northrup, you watch this man. And keep every Box L hand on this ranch in case I want any of you!"

They left the room and Andy Calvert breathed a long, slow sigh. His trick had worked. Only now he had tagged himself as a murdering thief.

The windows of the room were dark when Andy awakened again. He felt rested and, strangely, hungry. Sleep had done him plenty good. He realized suddenly that a man sat beside his cot.

"Feeling better, partner?" Northrup asked.

THE MOST THRILLING "COMIC" EVER WRITTEN !

● FIRST TIME IN PICTURES

● EVERY PICTURE A STORY

● APPROVED BY EDUCATORS

SAVAGE

10c A COPY

NOW ON SALE

"I . . . I do, for a fact," Andy said.

"That's good. Now, don't try to talk, just listen. I want to tell you not to worry. We found my brother back at the line camp. He's hurt bad but he'll live. He told us how you helped him and fought those range thieves. Another thing. When the marshal went to Agent Callahan and accused him of stealing reservation cattle, Callahan broke down and confessed. He thought he was dying from his wound. But the doc says he'll live to hang. So you're in the clear, old-timer."

Andy stared at him. "But you read the letter. You know I'm an ex-convict and a range thief—"

"I know that you're one hombre I want siding me. Sure, you've been on the off-side of the law. But you'd be a damn fine man if you got a break. I want to give you as good a break as you gave me."

"I gave you?"

"Yeah. Andy, that letter of yours which took the marshal off my neck and sent him hunting Callahan—that letter was written in pencil but the name on the envelope was written in ink. The marshal didn't see anything in that. I did. The name was written in *green* ink—the kind that's in that bottle on the table there. Andy, you been fighting Box L battles. You've been a Box L man. We want you to keep on being a Box L waddy. Will you?"

Andy blinked and flushed. In his husky, pain-weakened voice he said, "Sure. Yeah, I'd like that."

"Only one thing you got to promise," young Northrup added. "No fair hogging all the grief. Next time you fight a Box L battle you take the rest of us along!"

All at once the pain from his wounds wasn't bothering Andy any more. He looked up at his new friend and grinned warmly.

THE END.

FUN IN TUCUMCARI

BY C. WILES HALLOCK

Me and cavvy-wrangler Larry,
We loped down to Tucumcari
For to spree and mebbe see
  'Pokes from other spreads.
Went to Texas Charlie Case's
Pastime Parlor and Oasis;
Shot some pool and kept right cool
  Guzzlin' Knock-'em-Deads.

Waal, we didn't find no other
Waddies 'ceptin' Charlie's brother
(He's a dumb and shiftless bum
  Mostly on the loose.)
But there come a total stranger,
Lookin' like he craved for danger,
Speakin' rough and scowlin' tough,
  Cussin' like the dooce!

Charlie's brother, name of Willie,
Lickered up and grinnin' silly,
Mumbled, "Pard, don't be so hard!
  Have one on the house!
Don't ack like no Texas Ranger."
But the tough and total stranger
Smacked his paw on Willie's jaw,
  Roarin', "Fade, you louse!"

Willie, dazed and dumbly blinkin',
To'rds the alley door went slinkin'.
Then spoke Larry, loud but wary,
  Winkin' sly at me:
"Waal, it's time to quit this hangout.
Willie's went to git his gang out!
If we're yit here when *they* git here,
  'Twill be doom for *three!*"

Mr. Stranger strode to Larry
Quakin' pale and mumblin' scarey:
"Friends," he croaks, "would you two folks
  Help me git away?"
Waal, we hid the c'ardly feller
In a Tucumcari cellar,
Safe from silly, harmless Willie—
  For twelve dollars' pay!

With Thad Epper dealing from a cold deck, Gilt-edge Ragan knew nothing but a roaring pair of sixes would do for a

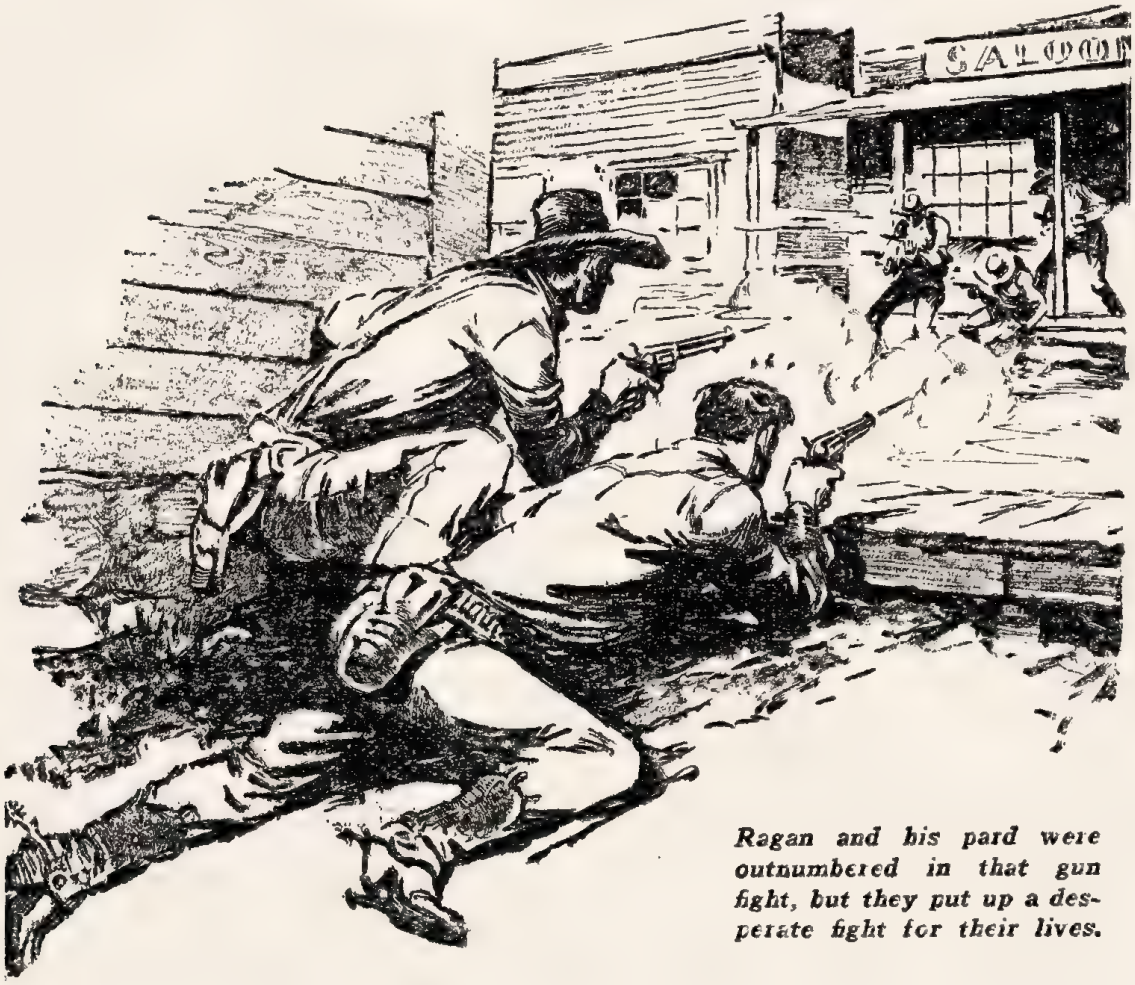
BOOTS AND SADDLE GAMBLER

BY RALPH YERGEN

IT HAD BEEN easy enough to exchange his gambler's frock coat and string tie for a cowman's wide-brim hat and flannel shirt, Gilt-edge Ragan was thinking as he trailed through the moon-frosted draw. But would it be as easy for him to switch from a gambler's thoughts and habits to those of a cattle rancher?

As he was rounding a shaded bend he came upon a scene so startling that it instantly brushed his musings out of his mind. Spangles of moonlight, sifting through an age-old juniper, danced grotesquely on a human body dangling at the end of a rope.

Gilt-edge Ragan halted his mare and squinted his greenish eyes. Was his imagination playing tricks? No,



Ragan and his pard were outnumbered in that gun fight, but they put up a desperate fight for their lives.

the man was wriggling in the noose. His feet were churning the air. A riderless black horse was slackening to a walk some yards beyond.

Ragan whisked a pearl-handled .38 from its holster. He spurred his horse on around the bend, keen eyes sweeping the shadows. Five horsemen were bunched in the draw, watching the man squirm helplessly in his death trap. Vague light failed to hide the cruel amusement that twisted Nick Gunod's bleak features. Gunod was ramrod of the Skeleton Key, largest ranch in the Vamalo section. Ragan's gaze briefly measured the others—Hip Dixon, Hophead Marx, Soft-nose Risling, and a wolf-gaunt man whose name Ragan had forgotten. They were all Skeleton Key riders.

As the mare's hoofs whittled the distance, Ragan saw that the lynch-rope victim was blond Bob Osgood, one of the homesteaders who had recently squatted on the borders of Skeleton Key range. Osgood had a wife and two kids.

Engrossed in their ghoulish work, the five hardcases didn't spot Ragan until he reached the hang-tree.

Nick Gunod hissed a warning: "Stay clear, Ragan!"

Ragan's answer was a sharp flash of gun metal. His right hand arced above the pommel and the barrel lined on Nick's mid-section.

"I'll give the orders from now on," Ragan said coldly.

His left hand dived into his pocket, came out with a long stockman's jackknife. Snapping open the blade, he crowded his trembling horse past the tree trunk.

"Hang up that gun, Ragan," Gunod blustered. "Beat it!"

As the hammer clicked under Ragan's thumb, Gunod's shifty fin-

OLD MR. BOSTON SAYS: "MY APRICOT NECTAR IS SURE TO PLEASE YOU!"

FOR TASTE, THIS DRINK IS SURE A PIP—
YEP— SMOOTH AND RICH IN EV'RY SIP!
FRIENDS WILL LIKE THIS DRINK A LOT— PROVES YOU REALLY KNOW WHAT'S WHAT!
OLD Mr. BOSTON
APRICOT NECTAR
A BEVERAGE LIQUEUR

Enjoy the flavor of fresh apricots in a robust liquor . . . Old Mr. Boston Apricot Nectar! Here's a drink that's "rich as brandy, smooth as honey." A handy drinking cup tops each pint. *Drink it straight.*

A Beverage Liqueur prepared by Ben-Burk, Inc., Boston, Mass.

OLD MR. BOSTON APRICOT NECTAR

ALSO BLACKBERRY • PEACH • WILD CHERRY—70 PROOF

fight CANCER with KNOWLEDGE

Helping thousands of frightened people to regain their peace of mind ...this is one of the most constructive services of the New York City Cancer Committee of the American Society for the Control of Cancer.

Your peace of mind will be helped by your support of the Committee's work through the purchase of its labels. Mail your dollar today. You will receive a book of package labels and the Quarterly Review, and you will share in a vital service.

New York City Cancer Committee
of the American Society for the Control of Cancer
130 East 66th St., New York, N.Y.

For my $1.00 please send a supply of package labels and the Quarterly Review.

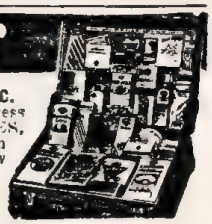
*name*_____

*street*_____

*city*_____ *state*_____

If you live outside the Metropolitan area, write to—American Society for the Control of Cancer, 350 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y.

FREE PRODUCTS



WRITE FOR $6.00 ASSORTMENT OF FOODS, GROCERIES, SOAPS, ETC.
SEND NO MONEY! Rush name and address for big Assortment of FOODS, GROCERIES, SOAPS, ETC.,—full size packages, worth $6.00. Yours ABSOLUTELY FREE! Show these products to friends, neighbors. Take orders for sensational values, more than 200 quality products used in every home. Earn big profits, full or spare time. No experience necessary. Write for FREE $6.00 Assortment of Products NOW.
ZANOL, 1892 Monmouth, Cincinnati, Ohio

Home-Study Business Training

Your opportunity will never be bigger than your preparation. Prepare now and reap the rewards of early success. **Free 64-Page Books Tell How.** Write NOW for book you want, or mail coupon with your name, present position and address in margin **today.**

☐ Higher Accountancy	☐ Business Mgm't
☐ Mod. Salesmanship	☐ Business Corres.
☐ Traffic Management	☐ Expert Bookkeeping
☐ Law: Degree of LL. B.	☐ C. P. A. Coaching
☐ Commercial Law	☐ Effective Speaking
☐ Industrial Mgm't	☐ Stenotypy

LaSalle Extension University

Dept. 1067-R A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION Chicago

gers froze. "If you cut down that son, you'll pay for it," he threatened. "We're stringin' him up for eatin' Skeleton Key beef. Thad Epper gave the order. You know what that means."

"Thad Epper can fry," Ragan said shortly. "And you'll beat him to it if you move one more finger."

Ragan saw that the squatter's face was blackening and that his struggles were growing more feeble. Little more than a minute could have elapsed since the noose had tightened, however, and a plowman of Osgood's hardy breed must have plenty of life left in him.

Three slashes sent Bob Osgood to the ground. "You'll have nothin' more than a sore neck if you steer clear of Thad Epper's gunhawks," Ragan told the nester.

In slicing the rope, Ragan had flicked his glance away from the lynch-hungry quintet. In that split second motion erupted from the shadows. Ragan saw the wolf-gaunt gunman claw at his thigh.

"Hustle, Osgood!" he yelled.

His gun muzzle twitched, coughed smoke and thunder. He aimed for the shoulder, but the Skeleton Key bronc jumped at the same instant, and Ragan saw a dark spot blotch the gunman's hollow chest.

The gambler cursed. A killing was the thing he least desired. Out of an eye corner, he saw Osgood hurl the loosened rope coil away from him and stagger toward his grazing horse, breath whistling in and out of his lungs.

Hands ripped thighward among the Skeleton Key group. The hard-hit gunman toppled from the saddle. His frightened horse pawed, snorted, plowed through the cursing, gun-grabbing group. Confusion reigned. A shot rang out, but the bullet zipped wildly through juniper branches.

Ragan saw Bob Osgood awk-

wardly haul himself into the kak. Then he spun on his mount, slapped home the spurs. His horse flattened out like a rabbit, streaking for the bend.

WITH a roar, gun thunder split the night and bullets screamed close to Ragan's ears. His jaw muscles tightened as he crouched low over the fluttering mane. A ragged hole appeared in his new Stetson. A slug stung his arm like a giant hornet. He flung his gun arm over the mare's rump and blasted a cylinderful of bullets in his wake.

A howl of pain shredded the echoes. The next instant his bronc was leaning in toward curving rock that abruptly shut off the bullet hail, but Ragan could hear the sharp tread of hoofs strike up behind him. Thad Epper's gunhawks were deserting Osgood's trail.

"After bigger game," Ragan murmured dryly.

At the first inclining gully arm, Ragan pulled out of the draw. He grinned as he listened to the Skeleton Key riders roar on up the defile. They wouldn't be fooled for long, but it gave him the start he needed. He doubled back along the sage-cloaked prairie in the direction he had first been heading.

Vamalo lay ahead over a good many miles of prairie swells. And in Vamalo, Ragan judged, he would be as safe as he could expect to be now that he had bought chips in Thad Epper's range-czar game.

Maybe it had been a foolish act, now that Ragan came to think it over in the lonesome coolness of prairie night. He was a cowman now. All cowmen were supposed to hate squatters and rustlers worse than poison. He hadn't thought about that when he horned into the necktie party. Homesteaders could ruin him as well as Thad Epper. All those squatters were going to get some considerable hungry before their crops matured.

But even though he had become a ranch owner, the thought of siding a man like Thad Epper stuck in Ragan's craw. Already the range's wealthiest man, Epper was pulling every possible wire to make himself a virtual dictator of the Vamalo country. He was grooming his foreman, Nick Gunod, to run for sheriff next election against the present lawman, Irish Joe Bryan.

The lights of Valamo grew brighter as Ragan neared them. He slipped through the outlying Mexican huts, crossed the railway tracks and loped up a side street to the sheriff's office, where he dismounted, intending to report the incident. But the windows stared darkly, the doors were locked, and the sheriff's horse was gone from the back shed.

"Just like a star-toter," Ragan muttered. "Always gone when you need him."

But Ragan's disgust was thinned by the knowledge that Sheriff Joe Bryan had plenty to keep him busy. Three days before a trail herd of a thousand head, select Hereford breeding stock, had vanished some fifty miles from Vamalo.

The five punchers handling the drive were found shot to pieces, plainly murdered from ambush. Ordinarily a herd of that size would be easy to trail. But it was a well-grazed section bordered by a maze of countless rock-floored canyons. Signs indicated the herd had been broken up to confuse trackers, an act which certainly had proved successful.

Gilt-edge Ragan possessed much more than a casual interest in that herd. He was thinking about it when a bullet howled out of the

night, splintering the wall inches above his head.

RAGAN leaped back into a store building shadow. His gun filled his fingers like swift magic. Flame slashed out of an alley mouth across the street and Ragan's gun roared as he slid backward along the boards. An angry crackle of gunfire quashed the echoes. Bullets droned through the night and peppered the wall like buckshot.

"Gunod and his gun wolves," Ragan thought. "When they found I tricked 'em, they figured I'd hit for town. They cut in by another trail."

Ragan continued to creep along the building side, glad that his clothing was dark. His mind quickly sketched the situation. Epper had given his ramrod orders to kill him on the slightest provocation. Epper was afraid of Ragan's growing power in the community, afraid that he might challenge the Skeleton Key's range tyranny. The Osgood affair and the killing of the wolflike gunman was a play straight into Epper's hands.

Ragan reached the corner. Moonlight swathed the back wall, but across a littered space he spotted a dark shape skulking behind a junk heap. He lifted his gun and fired. The figure slogged down and rolled out into the moonlight to lie still, beady eyes staring out of a cruel, yellowed face.

"Hophead Marx," Ragan muttered. "He's taken his last shot in the arm."

Dodging around the corner to escape the sudden shower of lead that burst from the side and behind, the gambler sprinted through knee-high weeds to the next corner. As he rounded it, he almost stepped on a tawny-haired Skeleton Key puncher crouching behind a leveled gun. Ragan lurched aside in a lightning movement. Fire splashed in his face, blinding him for an instant. He swung the .38 with a sharp wrist snap, felt it crunch on skull bone.

The tawny cowpoke was a limp heap when Ragan hopped over him and raced through the weeds across the next moon-tinsled stretch. That waddy hadn't been with Gunod before. It meant that Gunod had gathered his men from town saloons to join in the man hunt. Odds against him had skyrocketed. Nobody would investigate the shots. The sheriff was gone and townsmen wanted no part of a nocturnal gun battle. They preferred to stay indoors and protect their own hides.

The next building was the town church. Its steeple tower cast a long, pointed shadow and Ragan's pumping legs carried him toward it. Without warning, a terrific force suddenly smashed into his side. The earth dealt him a resounding jar and pain stabbed through him like a phalanx of barbed needles.

Lizard fashion, he crawled along through the dusty weeds. He saw dark shapes, like phantoms in the night, drifting toward the church shadow. Down the street, a saloon piano jangled its monotonous rhythm. A well-soaked cowpuncher howled at the moon like a coyote. But the silence that encompassed the dark church building was pregnant with deceit and death. Ragan kept on crawling. He had to get away before that bullet wound claimed his senses. The gloom was thick and he knew the roaming gunmen couldn't see him moving along.

Nick Gunod's harsh voice cracked out. "Close in easylike. I think we got him. I seen him fall."

Just in time, Ragan rounded the corner of the church, A ragged line

of shadows fanged the sidewalk, and he catfooted past the silent buildings. His wound was a throbbing dynamo of pain in his side but he gritted his teeth and kept going.

The shadows retreated before a lone street lamp's challenge. Directly across from Cowboys' Harbor, he paused for breath. He could hear Gunod's men kicking around back there, but caution was slowing their progress. Risking a bullet in the back, he hurried across the street and staggered through the big saloon's swing doors.

Elbowing loafers out of his path, Ragan bellied to the bar and stared at his image in the back mirror. A wild sight met his eyes. His sandy hair looked like a barbed-wire entanglement. Alternate streaks of blood and dirt smeared his face. One side of his shirt was red and soggy, and blood drops coursed a brownish path to his knees.

"Rum!" he demanded loudly.

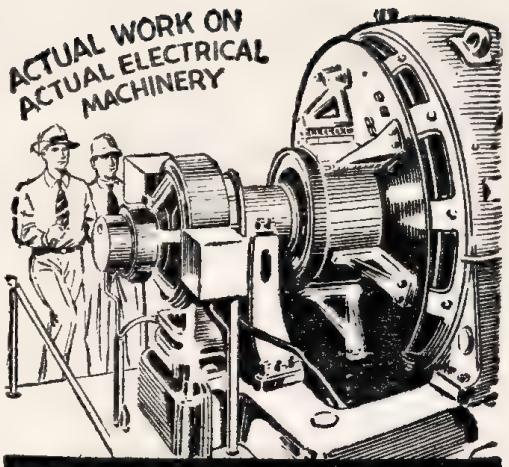
A bartender with mutton chop whiskers thrust a gold-necked bottle and a glass across the bar. As Ragan poured the glass brimful, the barkeep's yelp sheered through the hubbub like a locomotive blast.

"Man, you been shot!"

Abrupt silence followed his words. Eyes swiveled to the disheveled gambler, bulged in fascination, as if the men were wondering if this could actually be Gilt-edge Ragan, the immaculate gambler. Ragan gulped the drink straight, then glanced down at the stain. He said easily, "Why, so I have."

Loud guffaws rocked the room. But one man didn't join the laughter and Gilt-edge Ragan's greenish eyes found him. He was a rugged, sledge-chested man of forty. The mark of greed was printed in the arrogant lines of his bony face. Something of a tyrannic mania lurked in the depths of Thad Epper's slate eyes.

In that moment, born of sheer des-



TRAIN FOR A BETTER JOB IN
ELECTRICITY
12 WEEKS SHOP TRAINING

PAY TUITION
AFTER GRADUATION

My big **free book** tells you how **we train you in 12 weeks** for your start to a better job and a better future.

Learn by Doing

You get your training **not by book or lessons but on actual electrical machinery and equipment.**

You **can get your training first** and then **pay for it in 12 monthly payments starting 5 months after you start school or 60 days after your 12 weeks training period is over.** Mail coupon for all the details of this plan.

Earn While Learning

Don't let lack of money stop you. **If** you need part time work to help out with living expenses we will help you get it.

Previous Experience or Advanced Education Not Necessary

You don't need any previous electrical experience or advanced education to get my training.

Graduate Employment Service

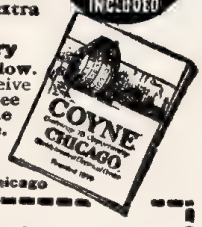
After graduation every graduate is given employment help, consultation help and many other services to help him make a success of his training.

4-Weeks Extra Radio Course Included

Right now I am including an extra **4 weeks course in Radio.** This training is given you **at no extra tuition cost.**

Get My Complete Story

Fill in and clip the coupon below. Then mail it to me. When I receive it **I'll send you my big free book** and **all the details of the features I have outlined here.**



H. C. LEWIS, President
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 70-45, Chicago

H. C. LEWIS, President
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL;
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 70-45, Chicago, Ill.

Please send me your big Free Opportunity Book and all the facts about Coyne training.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

INDIGESTION?

HAS your physician told you your digestive disorder is partly due to a lack of B vitamins? And that a generous supply of this important group of vitamins is essential if the digestive tract is to work properly? Ask him about Fleischmann's Fresh Yeast. Many authorities hold that yeast is the very best way because the vitamins are *natural* not synthetic. And Fleischmann's Yeast contains the complete B family—not just some of the more common members, as do most costly concentrates.

Try Fleischmann's Yeast this pleasant way: Mash the yeast cake with a fork in a glass. Add ¼ glass cool water, plain tomato juice or milk. Stir till blended. Add more liquid. Stir and drink immediately. Drink 2 cakes every day. One, first thing in the morning—one before bed at night.

Copyright, 1940, Standard Brands Incorporated

$1.00 POSTAGE PAID

Howdy-Cowboy! Be the first to wear "VAQUERO" Genuine Cowboy Belt from Texas

"Vaquero" means "Cowboy" down Mexico-way and we mean this is the same belt ranchers wear in border cattle country. Tooled steerhide with silver finish saddle brass buckle and fittings. Tan, brown or black in sizes for men, women, boys and girls. Send color choice, waist size and

Just $1 to "TEXAS TRADING POST"
P. O. Box 456 - San Antonio, Texas

WRITE STORIES FOR PAY!

Send today for FREE Market Test. Discover the many ways you can make money NOW in the thrilling and independent writing profession. Hundreds of paying markets. Learn the markets best suited to your abilities and sell what you write. WE HELP YOU! Mail a postcard for your Market Test. No obligation. Act now!

FREE MARKET TEST

COMFORT WRITER'S SERVICE, Dept. 506, St. Louis, Mo.

STOP Itching

GET RELIEF This Fast Way -or Money Back

For quick relief from itching of eczema, pimples, athlete's foot, scales, scabies, rashes and other externally caused skin troubles, use world-famous, cooling, antiseptic, liquid D. D. D. Prescription. Greaseless, stainless. Soothes irritation and quickly stops the most intense itching. 35c trial bottle proves it, or money back. Ask your druggist today for **D. D. D. PRESCRIPTION.**

MAN WANTED

HANDLE ONE OF OUR BIG PAY ROUTES
Sell to Stores on New Plan

Carry a complete "Wholesale Supply House" in your hand. Let us start you making Big Money in permanent business of your own. Show Storekeepers in every business how to DOUBLE profits on Nationally Advertised Goods. Over 200 Products. No experience needed. We supply everything. Free Book gives amazing facts.

World's Products Co., Dept. 66-E, Spencer, Ind.

LAW STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Big corporations are headed by men with legal training.

More Ability: More Prestige: More Money

We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL. B. Successful graduates in every section of the U. S. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send for them NOW.

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1065-L, Chicago
A Correspondence Institution

peration, a crazy plan shaped in Gilt-edge Ragan's mind. Epper prided himself upon his poker skill. Perhaps it was fate that he had never matched poker wits with Ragan. But tonight he would gamble with Ragan. He would be forced into it.

Gilt-edge pounded the bar. "To blazes with gambling with pennies! Let's have a man-size game. Are all you cowmen pikers? Who packs the guts to gamble for cattle?"

Men glanced at each other. Some tapped their heads significantly. Others looked at Thad Epper, the sledge-bodied owner of the Skeleton Key.

A scornful sneer curled Epper's flat lips. "Where the hell are your cattle, Ragan? Put up or shut up."

Ragan poured himself another drink. "Didn't you hear? I bought the Big Eight."

Epper's slate eyes glittered coldly. "I heard a rumor. But I ain't fool enough to believe it. I—"

A thin, bookish man in a business suit stepped from the muttering lines. "Ragan bought the Big Eight last week from Charley Connor," he said. "County records show it, Epper."

Epper grunted. His eyes swept back to Ragan, measured the gambled narrowly. Watching him, Ragan was making a fair stab as reading the cattleman's mind. The Big Eight was one of the larger Vamalo ranches. Epper wanted it. He had practically forced Connor to the wall. But Connor had fooled him and sold the ranch to Ragan.

Epper believed Ragan was somewhat irrational from his wounds and slightly drunk besides. Here was a good chance to break him and gobble the Big Eight into his cattle empire. Besides, if Epper refused, men would think he was afraid to play a common gambler. The tale would spread. Epper's stock would go down.

Epper thumbed toward a table. "You're askin' for it, tinhorn!" he growled.

ANOTHER drink quelled Ragan's spinning dizziness. He washed the blood from his hands and dried them on the bartender's apron. Then he walked to the table and chose a seat where he could watch all doors and windows. He'd hardly settled when Nick Gunod glided into the room. Nick's icy blue eyes screwed to chill slits. Ragan smiled innocently.

Epper glanced sharply across the table. "Draw poker, huh? Each chip counts fifty head—cows, steers, slick-ears, and bulls. I'm stockin' twelve thousand, eight hundred head."

Ragan nodded. "Connor's tally shows four thousand, two hundred and fifty on the Bar Eight." He wondered what Epper would say if he knew more about that Big Eight transaction.

Supremely confident, Epper dealt. As Ragan's fingers touched smooth pasteboards, the magic skill that he had spent his life developing flowed through him, transforming him to the poker wizard that had met and matched the best the West could offer.

A ring of prying eyes formed around the table. A hidden tensity seemed to hover in the foul, fume-reeked air. All other games suspended, and the bar became a length of lonesome oak.

On the strength of a pair of aces against Ragan's queens, Epper raked in the first pot. It proved a bad omen for the bulky Skeleton Key owner, even though it became evident that he was a poker player of no mean caliber.

Before twenty minutes had slipped past, Gilt-edge Ragan, the cowman, knew that Gilt-edged Ragan, the gambler was hot. He was filling long-chance hands regularly. And when he did draw a dud, he would leave Thad Epper stranded with his fattest hands. He crowded his luck in a manner that the crowd deemed wild and reckless.

Warning signals clanged in Ragan's mind as he saw Hip Dixon, Soft-nose Risling, and the other Skeleton Key waddies filter into the crowd. They joined Nick Gunod, conferred in muttered tones, but Epper gave no sign he knew they were in the room.

The cards made silken sounds under Ragan's long, tapered fingers. He placed his bets with quick decision. His wound quieted to a dull throb, but the zealous fire within him mounted with the chip stacks in front of him. After two hours of play, they equaled Epper's pile.

Ragan heard Gunod's worried mutter. "Long past midnight, Thad. Time we was whackin' leather, ain't it?"

Suspense seized Ragan. If Epper quit now—

But the big cowman's face drew into a dogged scowl. "He reeks with the devil's own luck," he grumbled. "It can't last. I'll bust him before daylight."

Ragan's face showed none of his relief. At Epper's call, he spread triplets that took Epper's doubles into camp.

The swing doors squeaked and Ragan glanced up sharply. A gray, gimlet-eyed man, his features sun-battered, a dusty star on his vest, stepped into the blue fog of tobacco smoke. Waning hope strengthened, surged through Gilt-edge Ragan. He could breathe easier with Irish Joe Byran in the room.

It was Ragan's deal. As he reached for the cards, he glanced

down at his chips. His stack was slightly the larger now. People thought he owned more cattle now than Thad Epper did. But Ragan knew that Epper was right about his run of luck. It wouldn't last forever. He was about due for a streak of pastings.

The time was ripe and the wild, desperate scheme simmering in the back of his head began to live as cards dovetailed into a neat deck between his palms. His fingertips called up the wizardry of the years. All Thad Epper and the spellbound observers saw, they interpreted as an ordinary shuffle, not too fast, not too slow. Epper cut three ways. As Ragan scooped up the deck, his palm briefly covered it. When he transferred it to his left hand, Epper's cut had been cleverly nullified.

A dry feeling touched Ragan. Like all gamblers, he had practiced cold-decking ever since he could remember. But this was the first time he ever dealt one in a competitive game.

Epper opened and kept four cards. Ragan retained two, and scalped the deck slowly. Epper shoved one of the chip stacks to the table center. The crowd gasped. Was Epper bluffing?

Ragan's fingers fed the pot, raising Epper twenty chips—a thousand head of cattle. Sensing the game's climax, the crowd pressed close, a staring, sweating circle.

Ragan felt Epper's auger-point eyes boring into him. Even before Epper acted, Ragan knew he was going to raise. The pot fattened steadily. The stale air grew sultry. Above Epper's rugged head, Ragan saw Nick Gunod's face twitch nervously. His gunhawks stared down at the table. In the background Sheriff Joe Bryan stood with thumbs hooked in gun belts, his leathery face drawn in a puzzled frown. Noisy breathing alone disturbed the hush.

Epper's stack was dwarfed by the immensity of the pot, but still the big cowman kept boosting. Finally he shoved out the last of his chips. Ragan curried his chin and shifted in his chair. He peeked at his cards again, then pitched in with enough counters to call.

"That closes the big pot, Epper," he said. "But I'm sittin' here with four hundred, fifty head which are bawlin' to back my cards. How about a side bet?"

Epper's eyes gleamed. "You're talkin' to no piker now, tinhorn. How's my check for two thousand cartwheels?"

Ragan shook his head. "No dice, my friend."

"A hundred acres of prime graze?" Epper growled.

"We agreed to gamble for cattle, Epper. If you want to wash the board, one way or another, go buy some cattle to match me!"

"Where the hell can I buy cattle this time of night?"

"That's your worry."

Epper scowled darkly. His gaze dropped to the cards that lay face down in front of Ragan. The eyes of the crowd followed him. Ragan had drawn three. That could only mean he had held a pair. His best hand now could be four of a kind. Epper had drawn one. He might have filled anything, even a straight flush.

Ragan's heart was pounding against his ribs. He could see that Epper was confident, mighty sure he held the best cards. The big cowman's eyes stabbed upward. "I forgot," he said. "I own six hundred head in Blaze Canyon. More'n enough to match you. Let's see 'em."

"Hold on," Ragan snapped. "How do I know you got any cows in Blaze Canyon? Sounds fishy to me. You'll have to write it down."

"My word ain't good, huh?" Epper flared.

"Not with me," Ragan said bluntly.

Epper cursed, scribbled on the back of a weight slip, flipped the paper across the table. "That suit you?" he sneered.

Ragan nodded, dropped the note on the gorged pot, and pushed in the rest of his chips. Strained eyes converged on Ragan's fingers as they closed on his five cards. Breathing hushed. Triumph was breaking through Thad Epper's stolid mask. His dream of added wealth and crushing defeat to a new challenger was stirring to reality.

Grim humor seized Ragan. With a casual movement, he riffled his cards face up on the table top. No two were alike. The hand was completely worthless. A low mutter of amazement ran through the circle.

Epper's eyes bulged from their sockets. He barked, "Why, what the hell—"

Ragan heard mumblings behind him. "What did I tell you? Ragan's gone loco."

"Crazy as a loon!"

"Needs a doctor pronto. Watch him close, he's packin' a smoker!"

Ragan grinned as his gaze brushed Epper's four kings and an ace, an almost unbeatable combination. He reached out and shoved the enormous pot across the table.

"You win, Epper," the gambler acknowledged. "But it might interest you to know that I haven't any cattle."

AS the words soaked in, Epper stiffened. His voice was thick, choked with budding anger as he ground out, "Why, you damned liar!

Sensational Offer

LOVELIGHT and LOVEBOND

LOVELIGHT

only $1.00 FOR ONE

Both for $1.69

LOVEBOND

½ KARAT (approx.) IMITATION

DIAMOND RINGS

MOUNTINGS IN 1-30 14 KARAT YELLOW GOLD or STERLING SILVER

SEND NO MONEY. Pay postman $1.00 ONLY if for one, or $1.69 if for both, plus small postage charge, or enclose money with order and we will pay postage. State if Gold or silver, giving size! RINGS are of the finest craftsmanship. Every jewel Hand set and imported and U. S. Gov't duty has been paid. These are America's greatest imitations.

10-DAY FREE TRIAL

Wear ring 10 days. If for any reason you are dissatisfied, return rings and your money will be refunded by return mail. Greatest sale in our history. RUSH ORDER. Limited quantity.

MAIL COUPON NOW!

THE DIAM-O-GEM CO.
303 5th Ave., Dept. "A-10", N. Y. City

Kindly send the following Ring or Rings

☐ LOVELIGHT ☐ LOVE BOND
☐ Gold ☐ Silver ☐ Size

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....

"SEE CORONA *FIRST!*"

Tops in portable typewriters...SpeedlineCorona...three fine models. Fast, easy to operate, up-to-date. Floating Shift, Touch Selector, etc. Smart carrying case also.

Also two Corona Zephyr models...compact, light (9 lbs. and 9¾ lbs. in case) and amazingly complete. Standard 84-character keyboard, back spacer. Big value for students.

★ *Use coupon below for free copy of color folder showing all five models and easy payment plan. Mail now.* ★

CORONA

"BEST KNOWN—BEST LIKED"

L C SMITH & CORONA TYPEWRITERS INC
Desk 10, 707 E. Washington St., Syracuse, N. Y.
I'm thinking of buying a Corona. Please send free folder describing ☐ Zephyr ☐ Speedline.

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____

© T. B. W. RPB

NEW BENJAMIN AIR RIFLES WITH HAND PUMP

MADE IN U. S. A.

.22 .177 BB

HARD ACCURATE SHOOTING WITH CHAMBERED AIR

You can use new model **BENJAMIN AIR RIFLES WITH LEVER HAND PUMP anywhere, for practice firing or just plinking,** around the house or camping, fishing, hunting, etc., at low-cost cost. **Shooting force is adjustable** with **amazing maximum power and accuracy**—no recoil or forward lunge to disturb your aim. **Bolt Action-Hammer Fire-Hair Trigger-Safety Lock-Hand Pump.** Single Shot BB $7.50; Single Shot Cal. .177 or .22 with rifled barrel $8.50; BB 25 Shot $9.00. Also a complete line of **BENJAMIN GENUINE COMPRESSED AIR PISTOLS** from dealer or factory. **Write Today.**
BENJAMIN AIR RIFLE CO., 884 Marion St., St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

Learn To MOUNT BIRDS

Tan SKINS, Make Up FURS

Be a Taxidermist. *Double your hunting fun.* We teach you **at Home.** Mount **Birds, Animals, Pets, Heads and Fish.** Save your hunting trophies; decorate home and den. **MAKE MONEY.** Mount and Krome-tan for others. Big spare-time profits. **INVESTIGATE TODAY.**

FREE BOOK with 100 game pictures, 48 pages. Hunters, get yours! It's **Now Free.** Send postal card **TODAY — This Minute!** State your **AGE.**
NORTHWESTERN SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY; Dept. 1417, Omaha, Nebr.

$1.98

5 YEARS Guarantee.

This 5-yr. guar. American made 16-size, solid gold effect case, railroad engraved back watch C.O.D. $1.98. Biggest bargain offered. If you order two we will give one free. Agents wtd. Order TODAY. Pay postman price plus postage on delivery. Money back guarantee.
WINEHOLT CO., Box W22, WOODBINE, PA.

TYPEWRITER 1/3 PRICE

STANDARD OFFICE MODELS
1/3 MFRS. ORIG. PRICE

Easiest Terms as Low as 60¢ A WEEK

All late models completely rebuilt like brand new. **FULLY GUARANTEED.**

No Money Down – 10 Day Trial

Free price-smashing catalog shows all makes in colors. **FREE COURSE IN TYPING INCLUDED. See catalog before you buy. SEND NOW.**

INTERNATIONAL TYPEWRITER EXCH.
Dept. 1012 231 W. Monroe St., Chicago, Ill.

10c A DAY

you said you bought the Big Eight. Where's that mealy-mouthed lawyer?"

Ragan's grin faded. "Sure, I bought the land, not the cattle. They still belong to Connor."

Epper roared out in a voice that quivered with rage. "Get out of Valamo, you tinhorn cheat! Vamoose before you're rode out on a rail. You're through, you damn, dirty—"

"Hold your hat, Epper," Ragan broke in coldly. "I had some cattle. I owned a thousand head of breeding stock. But six days ago, on their way to the Big Eight, my five trail waddies were found bushwhacked about fifty miles out of Vamalo. The cattle had disappeared. Reckon they could have found their way to Blaze Canyon?"

The purple faded abruptly from Epper's big-boned face. His eyes speared downward at the chips in front of him. His fingers slid in amongst them like leopard claws. With a swift flex of his leg, Ragan hurled his chair behind him. His fingers hinged suddenly and a paper fluttered between them. He held it out to the sheriff who was elbowing a lane through the packed throng.

"Epper signed this statement, sheriff," he said crisply. "It reads he owns four hundred, fifty head in Blaze Canyon. How about rounding up a posse and hammering the dust for Blaze Canyon right now. If those cattle should happen to be what I think they are—"

The sheriff snatched the note. "If those are stolen cattle in Blaze Canyon, this proves Thad Epper guilty of rustling and murder!"

Epper cursed. It was a signal. A blur of motion erupted within Skeleton Key ranks. Ragan kicked the table at Epper who was dragging guns from under his coat tails and bellowing orders at his men. Chips flew up in a colorful spray. The

floor cleared magically as bystanders lunged out of the way.

Nick Gunod's gun cracked. Ragan saw the sheriff slap at his shoulder and crash heavily to the floor. Ragan's gun flickered to life in his fingers, spitting at the two hanging lamps. Blinding blue flame showered across the ceiling, then blinked out as the lamps clattered hollowly amid rocking thunder. Darkness wrapped opaque folds about the room.

Ragan leaped sideways. Red flame clawed at the spot where he had stood. He lowered his head and plunged toward the bar. His head struck something that yielded like rubber. He heard a grunt and the sound of a body flattening on the floor. His boots churned over boards and flesh alike until his outstretched hand jammed the long bar.

Nick Gunod's voice shrilled: "Blast him!"

Ragged spurts of flame licked in Ragan's wake. Without slackening his speed, he vaulted the bar, landing on something flabby he judged to be a liquor vender. He sprang up, struck a trayful of glasses which smashed to bits. The sound was dwarfed by an unholy crash as bullets ripped off sections of the bar-length mirror.

Familiar with the saloon's floor plan, he raced along the bar and dived through an open door into the stock room back of the big mirror. Moonlight sifted through a grimy window, painted vague patterns on the floor. Seizing an empty box, Ragan wiped out the panes with a vicious swing. Headforemost, he slid through the opening to the splintery sidewalk.

Ragan staggered to his feet, backed to the corner of the big saloon and thumbed fresh loads into his .38. The heavy tread of boots

Nine years old—and ten thousand dollars on his head!

● Slans! The supermen! Every human hated them—and there was a ten-thousand-dollar reward for every *dead* slan.

And Jommy Cross was a slan—a nine-year-old boy fleeing from the street corner where he'd just seen his slan mother shot dead in the street—fleeing with a bullet in his side from the secret police of the World Dictator. His father shot down months before—and the hand of every human being on Earth stretched out to him—to grab! DON'T MISS **"SLAN"** by A. E. van Vogt—in

Astounding
SCIENCE-FICTION

inside the walls beat like drums against his roaring ears.

With stunning force the thought came to him that though his long gamble had won, it also had lost. He had banked heavily on the sheriff's aid. But the lawman was sprawled on the floor with a bullet in him. That damning slip of paper which had been in the sheriff's hand was doubtlessly resting in Thad Epper's pocket by now.

Epper's swift, savage blow was the most effective one he could have used. With Skeleton Key guns blasting both the sheriff and Ragan to boothill, Epper doubtlessly figured on frightening the other watchers

into keeping their mouths shut. Gun law would prevail and his kingdom would remain secure.

The gambler realized escape was out of the question. There was no safety in Vamalo now and his wound wouldn't stand the jolt of a saddle.

"Here is the place," he murmured. "They'll come pouring outside—"

He spoke prophetic words, for human shapes suddenly darkened the sidewalk. Tongues of fire licked out. Bullets spurted dust in his face as he crouched low. His gun muzzle danced. Smoke belched in a dense cloud and the sting of powder fumes reached into his nostrils.

He saw Hip Dixon drop his guns, stagger drunkenly and trip over. Soft-nose Risling tried to hold himself up by clawing at the bare wall. Failing, he coiled up on the sidewalk like a snake.

More gunhawks filled their places. The street was growing dim as smoke hung over it in thickening layers. Screeching lead gnashed at Gilt-edge Ragan. His left leg jerked from beneath him as if driven by a giant maul. He tipped sideways and plunged into the ankle-deep dust of the street.

A howl of triumph ran above the bark of six-guns by the saloon's main doors. Blinking the dust from his eyes, Ragan raised his head and fired his last bullet into the middle of the group. A half dozen killers were lining weapons upon him, taking their time, confident they wouldn't miss.

Ragan saw a shadow fall across him. He felt a viselike hand close about his ankle. Then he was hauled bodily across the sidewalk behind the shelter of the saloon corner.

"He's got a pard," Gunod yelped. "Mow him!"

The guns snarled out in a vicious blast, raising long splinters on the warped boards. Fighting back the pain, Ragan twisted to one knee. He saw Bob Osgood, the blond-haired homesteader, peering around the corner, a cocked and leveled six-gun in his fist. The gun spoke and a hard, fighting grin quirked Osgood's mouth.

"That's for Nick Gunod," he clipped.

THE firing lulled and Ragan reloaded his smoking gun. "Thanks, pard," he said, "for dragging me out of there."

"Only prolonged the agony, looks like," Osgood replied grimly. "Too many for us. It's you that's got the thanks comin', for savin' my neck tonight."

"What brought you here?"

"I went home and moved the family to a safe place. Then I strapped on my gun and came down here to settle an argument with Epper."

"Clear out while your skin is whole," Ragan advised. "I can hold 'em off while you—"

"Go to hell," Osgood cut in. "Before we soak up more lead than we can carry, I want you to know I really did butcher a Skeleton Key beef. But only one, when my kids were hungry last winter. I figured to pay for it come harvest."

Renewed firing drowned the squatter's words. Bullets angled across the corner. A bloody gash appeared on Osgood's cheek. They crawled forward, their gun throats harmonizing in a harsh melody of blood and death. Dizzily, Ragan saw the Skeleton Key group fan out along the street.

Suddenly their ranks began to thin faster than he and Osgood were firing. Were his eyes playing tricks? Ragan shot another glance toward the saloon. Framed in the broad doorway he saw Sheriff Irish Joe Bryan swaying like a slender reed in the wind. Dark blotches stained his shirt and vest and his face was a ghostly hue, but twin .45s crashed in his hands with deadly effect. Above the chaotic din, his voice rang clearly.

"Drop it, ye bullet-brained sons, or I'll cut yer mangy hides to sausage!"

GENUINE DIAMONDS
ON APPROVAL
SEND ONLY $1
10 MONTHS TO PAY
Your Money Back If Not Satisfied

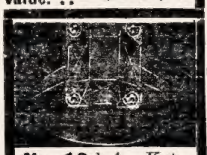
IMMEDIATE DELIVERY

BARGAIN OF THE MONTH No. 98

14 Kt. solid gold engraved wedding band. Only 50c monthly. Sale price $2.98

No. 41 Ladies Wrist Watch. 7 jewels. Dustproof, Shockproof. With Hollywood link bracelet. Written guarantee. $14.75

No. 14 Men's Watch. 7 jewels. Genuine leather strap. Fully guaranteed. Excellent value. .. $14.75


No. 12 14 Kt. SOLID GOLD BIRTHSTONE RING for the lady. Unusual value. Mention month desired with order... $11.95

No. 91 NEW 1941 ULTRA SMART LADIES DIAMOND RING. 3 genuine perfectly matched diamonds set in 14 Kt. solid white or yellow gold mounting. $19.95

No. 92 3-diamond engagement ring and 5-diamond wedding ring. 14 Kt. solid gold. Perfectly matched. Both for $29.95

Write For FREE Catalog
HOW TO ORDER: Send only $1. Pay balance in 10 monthly payments. State age, occupation. No extra charge. No red tape. Orders filled promptly.
ORDER TODAY.
ATLAS CREDIT JEWELERS
Dept. C3
225 Fifth Ave. New York, N. Y.

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED
Size 8 x 10 inches or smaller if desired. Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc., or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of original photo guaranteed.
47c
3 for $1.00

SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful enlargement, guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 47c plus postage — or send 49c with order and we pay postage. Big 16x20-inch enlargement sent C.O.D. 78c plus postage or send 80c and we pay postage. Take advantage of this amazing offer now. Send your photos today. Specify size wanted.
STANDARD ART STUDIOS, 113 S. Jefferson St., Dept. 770-M, Chicago

BECOME AN EXPERT
ACCOUNTANT
Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $2,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. About 20,000 Certified Public Accountants in the U. S. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."
LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1065-H Chicago
A Correspondence Institution

Send for my 50c book, how to develop
STRONG Arms and Shoulders
ONLY 25¢
with 20 full pages of Illustrations, showing and fully describing exercises that will quickly develop, beautify and make you gain great strength in your Shoulders, Arms, Wrists, Hands and Fingers.
Without Any Apparatus
This is really a remarkable course of Physical Culture exercises. Don't fail to send for it NOW. 25c coin or 30c U. S. Stamps.
A. BARKER, (Studio SS,) 1235 Sixth Ave., N.Y.C.
Individual instruction at my Physical Culture studio, for Health and Strength.

Classified Advertising

Patents Secured

INVENTORS—Time counts. Don't delay. Protect your idea with a Patent. Get 48 page Patent Guide Free. No charge for preliminary information. Write today. Clarence A. O'Brien, Registered Patent Attorney, OL51 Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

PATENTS—Reasonable terms. Book and advice free. L. F. Randolph, Dept. 513, Washington, D. C.

PATENT YOUR IDEA—Simple inventions often valuable. Two advisory books—free. Victor J. Evans & Co., 563-M Victor Building, Washington, D. C.

INVENTORS:—WE SUCCESSFULLY SELL inventions, patented and unpatented. Write us, if you have a practical useful idea for sale. Chartered Institute of American Inventors, Dept. 42, Washington, D. C.

Detectives—Instructions

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. WORK HOME. TRAVEL. DETECTIVE particulars free. Experience unnecessary. Write GEORGE WAGONER, 2640-A Broadway, New York.

DETECTIVES—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—TRAINING. Home—Travel—Fingerprints—Particulars Free. Chief Mullica, 577-S Orpheum Building, Jersey City.

Old Gold & Money Wanted

GOLD—$35 OUNCE. Ship old gold teeth, crowns, jewelry, watches—receive cash by return mail. Satisfaction Guaranteed. Free information. Paramount Gold Refining Co., 1500-G Hennepin, Minneapolis, Minn.

Photo Finishing—Developing

DOUBLE SIZE PRINTS. Roll developed, 8 prints all enlarged to nearly postcard size, 25c. Willard Studios, Dept. 9, Cleveland, O.

ROLLS DEVELOPED—25c coin. Two 5x7 Double Weight Professional Enlargements, 8 gloss prints. Club Photo Service, Dept. 17, La Crosse, Wis.

FREE—ONE ROLL DEVELOPED AND PRINTED FREE. Just to get acquainted, we will beautifully develop and print your first 6 to 16 exposure roll Free plus 5x7 inch enlargement Free, also sensational, new folding folio to frame your prints, all free with this ad. (Enclosing 10c for handling and mailing appreciated.) Dean Studios, Dept. 1024, Des Moines, Iowa.

Correspondence Courses

CORRESPONDENCE COURSES and educational books, slightly used. Sold. Rented. Exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Complete details and bargain catalog Free. Nelson Company, 500 Sherman, Dept. L-215, Chicago.

Help Wanted—Instructions

MAN WANTED—Trustworthy—steady worker. Manufacturer established 50 years will finance responsible man with complete stock of guaranteed food, farm and household necessities—you pay when sold. Mighty attractive proposition. Products well advertised on radio—a big help to success. Pleasant outdoor work. Experience not necessary. No slack seasons or layoffs. Write for no-investment offer. McConnon and Co., Room TK71, Winona, Minn.

M. M. EARNED $1174 in spare time for exceptional "cellar crop" Snow-King mushrooms! Free book tells if your cellar, shed suitable. We buy crops. United, 3848 Lincoln Ave., Dept. 533, Chicago.

That lethal crossfire spoke louder than the sheriff's words. Ragan saw the remaining three gunhawks arrow their hands skyward. Bob Osgood leaped up and rushed along the sidewalk to aid the lawman.

Ragan's lightning reflexes spun him about as his ears picked up a faint rustle behind. Thad Epper's rugged, rawboned body darkened the shadows of the back corner. His face was twisted into an ugly mask. Hate boiled out of his eyes. The gun in his hand swept up, a black flash of danger and death.

"The devil's luck is ridin' you, Ragan," he raged, "but by—"

Two gun blasts tangled and rolled through the town in one thundering wave. A slug hit Gilt-edge Ragan like an earthquake strikes a brick wall. Darkness seemed to swoop down from the sky. Vaguely, he visioned Thad Epper wilting earthward, heard him cursing in a strangled, blood-choked voice. Then the blackness clamped down.

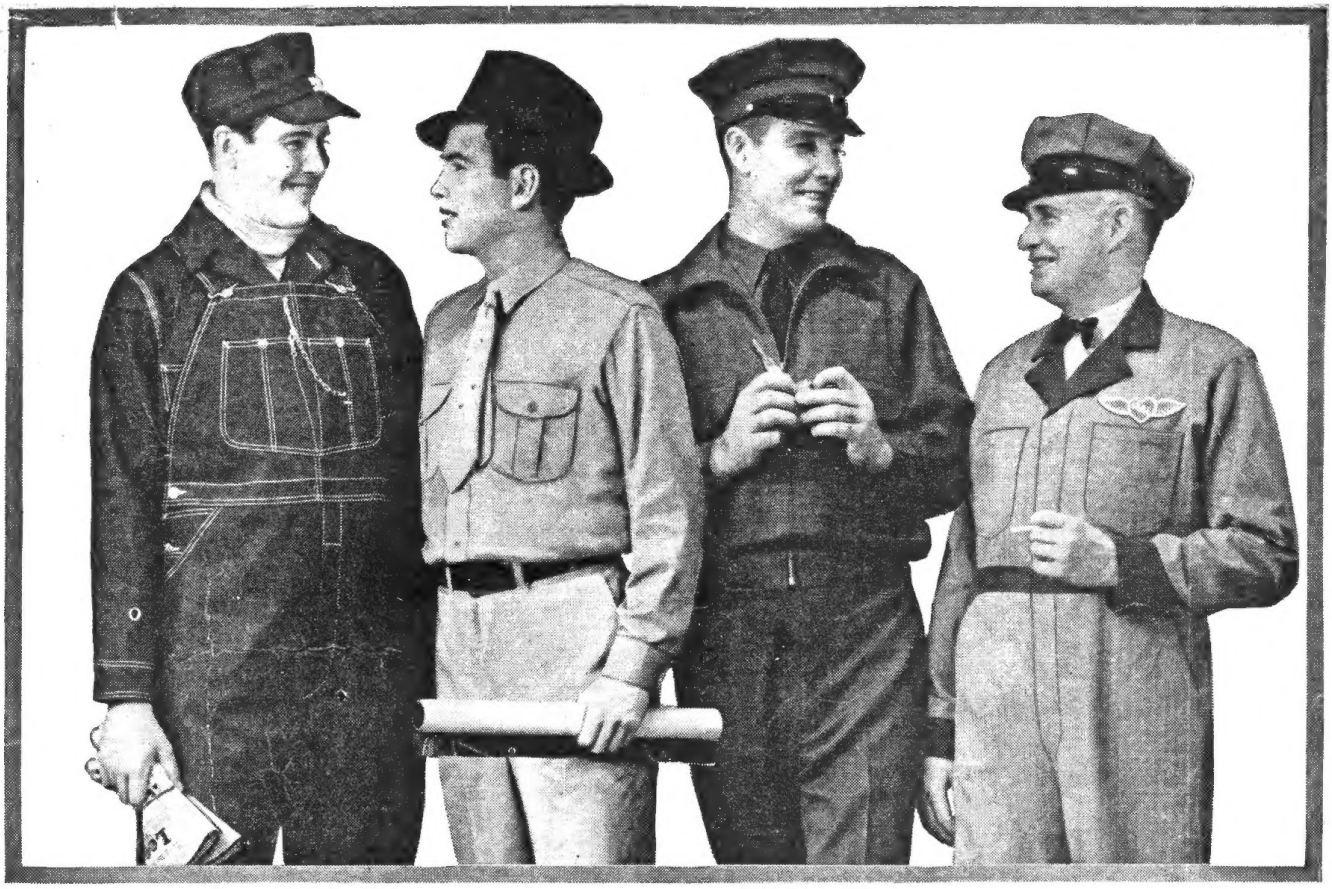
When Ragan opened his eyes again, daylight streamed into them from an open window. He tilted his head and saw Sheriff Joe Bryan lying on the next cot.

Memories flooded back, and he called anxiously. "Hey, Joe. Are you all right?"

The sheriff stirred and sat up stiffly. "Hell, yes," he grunted. "And so is everything else. Some of the boys rode out to Blaze Canyon early this morning. Just got back. They report your cattle are all there, most of them fresh branded to Skeleton Key. Now shut up and let me sleep."

Gilt-edge Ragan grinned and rolled over. Doubt about his ability to become a cowman was gone from his mind. He'd found out that luck, bluff, and skill played as big a part with cowman fortunes as it ever did in any gambler's game.

THE END.



"How Lee Union-Made Garments Help You To A Bigger Job With More Pay!"

JELT DENIM Lee OVERALLS

Genuine Jelt Denim in blue. Also choice of colors, fabrics and designs for every craftsman. Tailored sizes.

COLOR-MATCHED Lee SHIRTS & PANTS

Smart-looking fabrics styled for strength and long wear. Exclusive Agan Jeans, Treg Twills and Drills.

GENUINE Lee WHIPCORDS

Real style, warmth, fit—in tailored-size whipcords. Pants and blouses, with attractive Lee Shirts to match!

HINGE-BACK Lee UNION-ALLS

Sturdy, serviceable, one-piece uniforms give new work freedom with Lee "Hinge-Back" and tailored sizes.

The men who are really "going places" know the value of wearing Lee Garments. They've discovered that bigger jobs with better pay go to the *capable* men who *look fit,* too!

And *you* will look better in Lee *tailored sizes.* They're styled for more comfort—and Sanforized-Shrunk* so they'll *always fit!*

Best yet, sturdy Lee fabrics save you money month after month—through *longer wear!*

You can't lose when you buy a Lee!...If it doesn't last longer than any similar garment you've ever worn, you get your money back! See your Lee dealer now!

*Fabric Shrinkage Less Than 1%.

FREE! Mail coupon today for free illustrated literature, color swatches, and name of your nearest Lee dealer!

THE H. D. LEE MERC. COMPANY (Address Nearest Factory) **Dept. AF-11**

Kansas City, Mo. Minneapolis, Minn. Trenton, N. J.
South Bend, Ind. San Francisco, Calif. Salina, Kans.

Please mail me free illustrated literature, color swatches, and name of my nearest Lee Dealer. Am interested mostly in

☐ Overalls ☐ Union-Alls ☐ Whipcords ☐ Shirts & Pants

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State F4014

Q
Double and redouble your pleasure with the Smoker's Cigarette
Chesterfield
COOLER MILDER BETTER-TASTING
Do you smoke the cigarette that Satisfies
Q
Copyright 1940, Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co.